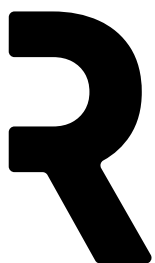




THE STATE OF SIDS REPORT 2026

Defending the special case

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The Resilient and
Sustainable
Islands Initiative
by ODI Global

REPORT **JUNE 2026**



**Government
of Ireland**
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Development
Programme

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Online ISSN: 2052-7209

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How to cite: Malifa, E., Wilkinson, E., Corbett, J., Bishop, M., Hurley, G., Lindsay, C., Bouhia, R. and Carter, G. (eds) (2026) *The state of SIDS report 2026: defending the special case*. London: Resilient and Sustainable Islands Initiative (RESI) by ODI Global (<https://www.resi-initiative.org/SSR-2026>)

Cover: Kendhoo, the Maldives. Photo: Ibrahim Shabil/Unsplash.

Acknowledgements

The inaugural *The state of SIDS report 2026: defending the special case (SSR2026)* has been made possible by the generous support of the United Kingdom's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), whose SIDS Hub saw the value of the Resilient and Sustainable Islands Initiative (RESI) back in 2021 and who has been instrumental in its growth. In particular, we thank Kiran Atwal, Martin Heather and Tim Hemmings, as well as Rachel Fitzpatrick from Ireland's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), for their ongoing support.

The SSR2026 editors are hugely grateful for the hard work and commitment of the chapter teams. The full teams are named as authors on each chapter but specific thanks are due to Stefano Moncada, Preeya Mohan, Yvonne Underhill-Sem, Merisa Thompson, Kalim Shah, Viliame Kasanawaqa, John Connell, Gail Hurley and Vikrant Panwar, whose intellect and adaptability was essential in ensuring high-quality synthesis, analysis and messaging needed for this Report.

We are grateful to the SIDS Permanent Representatives in New York, development partners and civil society organisations who reviewed and reflected on draft versions of the SSR2026 in 2025 at the 54th Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Meeting in Honiara, COP30 in Belém, and at the second SIDS Future Forum held at Wilton Park, Sussex, in January 2026. In particular, we thank Miguel Galante from Portugal's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who provided feedback on Chapter 5.

RESI has benefited from the input and support of many partners over the past five years. We particularly acknowledge Ambassadors Walton A. Webson (Antigua and Barbuda), Ali Naseer Mohamed (Maldives), Tania Romualdo (Cabo Verde), Fatumanavao-Upolu III Dr Pa'olelei Luteru (Samoa) and Ilana V. Seid (Palau), as well as Sai Navoti and Anya Thomas (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, UNDESA), Tishka Francis (UN Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States, UN-OHRLS), Simona Marinescu (IDCA Global Foundation), and colleagues from the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) Chair's team including Vladimir Budhu, Angelique Pouponneau, Michai Robertson, Tiffany Van Ravenswaay and Bryce Rudyk.

We deeply appreciate the enthusiasm and dedication of members of the RESI Affiliates Network for their thoughtful advice and support in early developments of the SSR2026. In no particular order they are: João Brito, José Lopes, Jessica Byron-Reid, Gareth Byatt, Sue Farran and Hillary Briffa. We also thank colleagues at Monash University, Australia, who reviewed each draft chapter: Lachlan McNamee, Gemma Sou and Elissa Waters. The generosity of these peer reviewers has been invaluable in the editorial process.

Finally, we wish to thank Ilan Noy for his patience and commitment to developing innovative data visualisations, Jo Fottrell for copyediting the full report, Lucy Peers for her excellent design work, and Ireland's DFAT for supporting the publication of this report and for communication and outreach events throughout 2026.

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Abbreviations and acronyms

ABAS	Antigua and Barbuda Agenda for SIDS
AI	artificial intelligence
AIS	Atlantic, Indian Ocean and South China Sea
AOSIS	Alliance of Small Island States
BBNJ	Agreement under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction
BPOA	Barbados Programme of Action
COP	Conference of the Parties
CRA	credit rating agency
CRDC	Climate Resilient Debt Clause
DRR	disaster risk reduction
DSM	deep-sea mining
EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zone
EWS	early warning system
FDI	foreign direct investment
GBF	Global Biodiversity Framework
GCF	Green Climate Fund
GDP	gross domestic product
GNI	gross national income
GW	gigawatt
ICJ	International Court of Justice
ICT	information and communication technology
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IPLC	Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities
IPV	intimate partner violence
IRENA	International Renewable Energy Agency
IUU	illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing
kWh	kilowatt hour
LDC	Least Developed Country
LGBTQIA+	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual and other identities

LMMA	Locally Managed Marine Area
MPA	Marine Protected Area
MRV	measurement, reporting and verification
MSP	marine spatial planning
MVI	Multidimensional Vulnerability Index
MW	megawatt
MWh	megawatt hours
NbS	nature-based solutions
NCD	non-communicable disease
ODA	official development assistance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PCI	Productive Capacities Index
PV	photovoltaic
R&D	research and development
RESI	Resilient and Sustainable Islands Initiative
SAMOA	SIDS Accelerated Modalities of Action
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SGBV	sexual and gender-based violence
SIDS	Small Island Developing States
SIDS4	Fourth UN SIDS Conference
SPAW	Specially Protected Areas and Wildlife
SRHR	sexual and reproductive health and rights
SSR2026	The state of SIDS report 2026
UN	United Nations
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
WTO	World Trade Organization

Foreword

Small Island Developing States (SIDS) face a unique set of vulnerabilities, which are being exacerbated by the twin challenges of our age: accelerating climate change and the collapse of the post-World War Two rules-based international order. Both challenges represent an existential threat for SIDS. Climate change has already and will continue to erode coastlines, shrink Economic Exclusion Zones, and lead to more frequent disasters and to biodiversity loss. Geopolitical posturing, especially in my own Pacific region, has the potential to undermine collective action and increase conflict. In each case, SIDS will be the first and worst affected.

Since the 1994 Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States, held in Bridgetown, Barbados, SIDS have used the platform provided by multilateral institutions to advocate for our 'special case'. The arguments we have employed all revolve around the consequences of our unique condition – our small population sizes and island geography – on development outcomes. We have had sustained success in convincing the world of our uniqueness, which has been reaffirmed at three subsequent United Nations (UN) SIDS conferences, including in my own country of Samoa, and via the creation of the UN's Multidimensional Vulnerability Index (MVI). Working through the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), we have also catalysed collective global action on climate change, most notably via the 2015 Paris Agreement.

After more than three decades of concerted effort we might hope that the SIDS 'special case' is an accepted norm of global multilateralism. In some ways, it is. But the collapse of that system, including recent cuts

to official development assistance (ODA) by many of the world's largest and wealthiest states, has placed unprecedented strain on multilateral institutions. As funding has become scarce, competition has increased, and the special case can no longer be taken for granted in the way it once was.

In this context, the SSR2026 gives an especially welcome boost to the SIDS agenda. Authored by the Resilient and Sustainable Islands Initiative (RESI), a global scientific advisory group run for SIDS, the Report brings together leading academic and policy research on economic development, social justice and inclusion, infrastructure and basic services, environmental sustainability and climate adaptation, and the support mechanisms and partnerships needed to advance all these agendas. The result is a one-stop shop for SIDS policy-makers and partners seeking to use the latest academic research to inform their work.

The Report makes several key observations and recommendations.

On economic resilience and development, it acknowledges the need to minimise the global reliance on extractive models of development, and to balance intrinsic vulnerabilities in SIDS, including small size, geographic isolation and extreme climate exposure. The Report makes recommendations to develop policy in three strategic areas, including digital leadership, climate-smart structural transformation, and harnessing Indigenous knowledge.

On health, education and social justice, the Report addresses the need to rectify persistent inequities occurring in SIDS countries. The chapter highlights the role of colonisation in creating inequities such as sexual and gender-based violence and analyses the possibility for transformation through a deeper understanding of ancestral, historical and contemporary power dynamics. The chapter suggests that with more statistical data on social justice and equity, SIDS can pursue evidence-based policy-making to address these issues.

On energy, water and transportation systems, the Report investigates ways to overcome common challenges for SIDS in the areas of energy transition, water resource management, resilient infrastructure, transportation and market connectivity. The chapter appreciates the tangible progress that has been made and the gaps in knowledge that persist, concluding that SIDS countries can address some structural vulnerabilities by investing in integrated infrastructure systems that enhance interdependence and create more resilient and sustainable development trajectories.

On environmental protection and planetary sustainability, the Report examines climate change, oceans, biodiversity and disaster risk reduction, as four themes that shape nature-societal and economic relations

in SIDS. The chapter confronts how these thematic areas and resulting structural vulnerabilities complicate SIDS' pursuit of sustainable development. It points to SIDS' successes as advocates in global policy-making, concluding that there is a need to equip our island nations with the tools needed to safeguard critical global public goods if we are to continually be expected to fulfil this role.

On the means of implementation, the Report discusses how effectively the international community currently supports SIDS to achieve our sustainable development ambitions, as articulated in the 2024 Antigua and Barbuda Agenda for SIDS (ABAS). The chapter acknowledges deficiencies in sustained, predictable and fair support for SIDS and reflects on the ways in which the international financial architecture can be reformed to better serve our needs. It concludes by posing a test to the international community to genuinely include SIDS in global rule-making, to advance from symbolic to structural solidarity.

When combined, the chapters all point to the fact that SIDS cannot remake the international system alone. But we do have the power and the responsibility to shape it to suit our needs, our realities. That is what the UN SIDS Conferences are all about. It's also why we created the Multidimensional Vulnerability Index (MVI). Reminding our development partners – and ourselves – of the need to continually argue for the importance of the 'special case' must remain a significant foreign policy goal for all SIDS. Our future depends on it.



Afioga Fiamē Naomi Mata'afa
Prime Minister of Samoa, 2021–2025

Summary for policy-makers

Authors: Emily Wilkinson and Kira-Lee Gmeiner

Chapter 1. Introduction: the global value of SIDS

- 1.1** Small Island Developing States (SIDS) face a common and distinct set of challenges resulting from their unique characteristics. Primarily driven by geography, their smallness, remoteness and islandness present specific obstacles to sustainable and sustained development. In the past, SIDS have successfully advocated for recognition of their special case but have faced barriers in securing tailored support. In recent years, these special circumstances themselves have come into question due to interwoven trends, including: a) new claims of special circumstances by other groupings; b) more severe and more frequent international crises linked to climate, conflict, economics and health; and c) a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape. Taken together, these trends pose a significant threat to global acceptance of the SIDS special case. Worryingly, this shift is occurring at precisely the same time that climate change is escalating and therefore amplifying SIDS' existing vulnerabilities. This makes tailored support even more vital, and it means the defence and revitalisation of the SIDS special case is now an urgent priority for all of these island nations and their development partners.
- 1.2** Rethinking development finance criteria is of high importance for SIDS. Current reliance on gross national income (GNI) per capita has seen many SIDS graduate to middle- and high-income countries, making them ineligible for numerous sources of concessional finance. Income-based metrics like GNI can prove misleading for SIDS because they obscure their high vulnerability to external shocks, including natural disasters. While SIDS have made some headway in the creation and integration of the Multidimensional Vulnerability Index (MVI), GNI is still the global standard. To improve their access to concessional and grant-based finance, SIDS should continue to champion measures that better reflect their unique circumstances.
- 1.3** New and emerging technologies present significant opportunities for SIDS to overcome structural and geographic challenges, including remoteness and market access. Existing research suggests that SIDS should work to introduce enabling frameworks and policies to capitalise on these emerging opportunities. Growing industries such as artificial intelligence (AI), e-commerce and remote working can enable SIDS to overcome structural barriers to sustainable development; however, the success of these industries will rely on proactive government policies around infrastructure, human capital and the regulatory environment.

- 1.4 SIDS can shape global institutions to meet their development needs. They have a history of outsized impacts on international negotiations, particularly in the areas of climate change and ocean governance. Our analysis suggests that SIDS should continue to grow this influence, by advocating for SIDS-centric reforms to existing institutions, by taking on key roles within organisations, and by exploring the creation of new international mechanisms that better reflect SIDS' needs and priorities.

- 1.5 Connectivity, collaboration and shared learning between SIDS have important benefits, particularly the strengthening of cross-regional connections. There is strong demand from SIDS stakeholders for the development and institutionalisation of new partnership models and denser intra- and inter-regional networks to facilitate the sharing of best practices, to support capacity-building and to strengthen collective responses to mutual challenges. The development of the SIDS Centre of Excellence is one example of a new institution that could help this integration. The Resilient and Sustainable Islands Initiative (RESI) is another.

- 1.6 Protecting and supporting SIDS is of collective interest for all. While vulnerability is one part of SIDS' story, these countries also provide significant value to the global community. They are custodians of vast ocean areas, they conserve critical ecosystems and biodiversity, and they are home to significant cultural diversity and global heritage. Recognising the value of SIDS in this way shifts the narrative from one of burden to one of opportunity in which greater support for small islands is an investment in planetary health, cultural richness, economic innovation and global stability.

Chapter 2. Resilient economies: increasing productive capacities in a self-help world

SIDS' special circumstances in building resilient economies

- 2.1 SIDS' development has traditionally been based on extractivist models, particularly in the Caribbean. While this has enabled some SIDS to overcome particular structural constraints, their development has been built through the depletion of natural capital and the invisible labour of communities. This is undermining long-term environmental and societal prosperity and it is not a sustainable avenue for SIDS to build resilient economies. Diversification has long been sought by SIDS, but productive capacities remain limited and genuine diversification stays out of reach for most.

SIDS' emerging challenges in building resilient economies

- 2.2 Traditional pathways to economic development rely on greater openness and integration but shifting geopolitics are making this increasingly difficult for SIDS. Their

highly open economies and reliance on imports and exports make them particularly exposed to global market changes. The return of a 'self-help' geopolitical system means SIDS can no longer rely on the multilateral concessions and support that previously underpinned their development trajectories.

Policy recommendations for building resilient economies

- 2.3** Emerging opportunities in ocean-based sectors, sustainable tourism, agriculture, aquaculture, digital services and the creative economy present potential development pathways for SIDS. Diversification into these growing sectors could enable SIDS to move towards self-sufficiency. SIDS should consider specific factors when looking to capitalise on these emerging opportunities.

2.3.1 Incremental and siloed approaches are not sufficient to reshape economic models. SIDS should focus on developing proactive policies with enabling institutional frameworks. It is vital that these approaches are multisectoral and integrated, and that they recognise structural and institutional barriers to create genuine development pathways that enhance quality of life.

2.3.2 SIDS should deepen collaboration and knowledge-sharing between island nations to learn from one another's experiences and minimise the impacts of capacity, technology and data constraints. Regional initiatives can also help SIDS to develop these industries by increasing market connectivity and bargaining power and by reducing transaction costs. Regional collaboration to harmonise rules and frameworks for emerging industries will also benefit SIDS.

2.3.3 Sustainable tourism models include slow tourism, eco-tourism and digital nomadism. To transition towards these models, SIDS must look to develop granular, subnational data on tourism and introduce revenue-generating tax policies. The rise of digital nomadism in SIDS relies on high-speed internet connectivity and modernised transport links.

2.3.4 SIDS should invest in research and development, fostering digital skills and investing in connectivity to capitalise on these emerging opportunities. Digitalisation could enable SIDS to leapfrog development, moving beyond primary commodity reliance towards a more robust and flexible economic base. SIDS must also implement robust legal and regulatory frameworks.

2.3.5 Emerging innovative financing models provide the potential to help SIDS develop these new sectors through early-stage funding. Successful scaling of these mechanisms relies on research, pilot projects and enhanced knowledge-sharing.

Chapter 3. Safer, healthier and more equitable societies: taking gender and care seriously

SIDS' special circumstances in safer, healthier and more equitable societies

- 3.1 SIDS face high levels of societal inequality, with gendered inequalities being of particular concern. Inequalities affect individuals, communities, social structures, discourses, imaginations, practices and responses to unfolding environmental and economic crises. Decades' worth of development interventions seeking to address inequalities have had limited success across SIDS because they have failed to account for the ancestral, historical, cultural and contemporary power relations engrained in societies. Entrenched inequalities are a key barrier to the aspirations of SIDS governments.

Emerging challenges in safer, healthier and more equitable societies

- 3.2 Climate change will exacerbate existing inequalities. Non-communicable diseases, infectious and vector-borne diseases, and drug-related transmission of HIV are all becoming more common, while civic space is shrinking and poverty is deepening.

Policy recommendations for safer, healthier and more equitable societies

- 3.3 Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) continues to be a major issue across SIDS. These countries should therefore place fairness and the transformation of gender relations at the centre of policies and development. This focus will enable SIDS to marry sustainable development with inclusive improvements in quality of life. Policies should look beyond gender sensitivity and responsiveness to more thoroughly address culturally ingrained inequalities and underlying structural norms.

3.3.1 Greater investment in contraceptives and maternal health services will benefit all SIDS. Comprehensive and culturally appropriate sexual and reproductive health services will improve both access and outcomes, with positive flow-on effects throughout societies.

3.3.2 The current lack of gender-disaggregated data across SIDS makes it extremely difficult for informed policy-making to address social issues at their root. States should look to build a gender-disaggregated dataset to better understand the levels and root causes of gender inequities. This knowledge will enable the design of policies to resolve underlying structural constraints.

3.3.3 For SIDS to address SGBV, they must consider how gender and sexuality interact with race, colonial legacies, economic factors and geopolitical contexts. This comprehensive understanding of underlying structural inequalities will enable

the design and implementation of nuanced and context-specific interventions. Strong government commitment to address these issues is necessary here, with meaningful participation from non-governmental organisations and communities. Also important are increased funding to education, preventative programmes and capacity development, plus efforts to address impunity.

3.3.4 Policy and planning should give greater visibility and value to the care economy to recognise, remunerate, redistribute and increase state support for this vital work. Doing so will help address gendered inequalities across SIDS. Improving social protections across island nations is also important to support individual and community resilience. Measures such as greater access to paid paternity leave will also help address engrained gendered inequalities.

- 3.4** SIDS should consider the employment and educational opportunities available locally. Increasing these opportunities and reducing structural and cultural barriers to uptake will help SIDS overcome challenges in youth unemployment, gender inequality and out-migration.

Chapter 4. Building a secure future: accelerating resilient infrastructure and energy transitions

SIDS' special circumstances in building a secure future

- 4.1** It is particularly difficult for SIDS to develop and maintain critical infrastructure due to their geographic isolation, small size and limited financial capacity. SIDS' continued reliance on fossil fuels is another challenge, as this is extremely costly, reduces energy security and increases SIDS' vulnerability to shocks. While new technologies such as renewable energy offer significant potential to reduce costs and improve energy security, adoption is hampered by remoteness, sunk costs and small market size. The unique characteristics of SIDS mean that failure in one system cascades across other systems and the entire economy.

Emerging challenges in building a secure future

- 4.2** SIDS are experiencing pandemic disruptions, tariff volatility and more intense climate change impacts. These challenges represent significant, economy-wide threats due to the interconnected nature of SIDS' systems. Even as SIDS look to develop new technologies, including transitioning to renewables, new obstacles emerge such as e-waste management and disposal, high and irreversible capital outlays, storage capacity and skills gaps.

Policy recommendations for building a secure future

- 4.3** The transition to renewable energy is a vital pathway for SIDS to build their secure future. Rapid technology advancements and innovations are making renewable options more accessible and practical for SIDS, but governments should consider their country's own unique circumstances and which renewable option is best suited.

4.3.1 Deliberate and coordinated transformation is required to overcome institutional constraints and past decisions that may have 'locked in' suboptimal choices around new technologies. Committed leaders and nimble governing systems are important to ensure SIDS are selecting the most appropriate pathway to secure their resilient future.

4.3.2 Innovations such as biogas stoves and decentralised mini grids are being used successfully across SIDS. Knowledge-sharing between SIDS is vital to learn lessons, understand best practices and maximise the adoption of equitable and sustainable solutions. Energy transitions in SIDS will be shaped by cost as well as by the quality of regulatory frameworks, availability of technical expertise, accessibility of finance and capacity of domestic institutions to adapt and innovate.

4.3.3 Proactive policy implementation and strong institutional frameworks are vital for SIDS to capitalise on emerging technologies and markets. This will allow SIDS to overcome structural constraints to their economic development. The costs and benefits of new projects must be considered to ensure they do not exacerbate existing inequalities.

- 4.4** Achieving a secure future for SIDS requires integrated approaches across energy, water, infrastructure, transport and market connectivity. For this type of system-wide development, SIDS need to strengthen state capacity, undertake regulatory reform, plan and invest for the long term, and leverage new technologies and partnerships. This demands a shift towards integrated, system-level investment packages. Partners should support this transition by funding systems not projects, and by supporting the establishment and maintenance of concrete structures for lesson-sharing.

4.4.1 New technologies, such as drones, satellite broadband services and undersea fibre-optic cables have the potential to overcome some of the geographical barriers that SIDS face, particularly among archipelagic states. Policy-makers should consider how these technologies could benefit their populations and establish necessary frameworks for implementation, resourcing and capacity-building, regulation and security. SIDS' cooperation and coordination to adopt best practices, including harmonising regulations and investing in digital skills, will help ensure that the adoption of such technologies translates into inclusive economic growth.

4.4.2 Integrated water resources management represents a holistic approach to resource management. In implementing this strategy, SIDS should consider discrepancies between national policies and local contexts. Lack of specific data and infrastructure can be a barrier to successful management, therefore measures such as groundwater mapping and analysis should be prioritised. As climate change continues to impact rainfall, water management in SIDS must be flexible and inclusive.

4.4.3 Enhancing inter-island connectivity and promoting regional markets can help SIDS develop their economies and disaster preparedness. Climate-proofing transportation hubs, including airports and ports, can further enhance disaster preparedness. These measures should be combined with policies that embed resilience socially and institutionally.

4.4.4 AI and emerging technologies have the potential to improve weather and disaster predictions across SIDS. Meanwhile, the incorporation of Indigenous and traditional knowledge can overcome barriers around specific contextual knowledge. Policy-makers must address challenges in integration, including data security and trust, knowledge valuation and reimbursement, and border frameworks for cooperation.

Chapter 5. Environmental protection and planetary sustainability: rebalancing nature–human relationships

SIDS' special circumstances in environmental protection and planetary sustainability

- 5.1** Well-known climate impacts, including rising sea levels, coastal erosion and increasing frequency and intensity of natural disasters, are having significant impacts on SIDS. The vulnerability of SIDS is well documented but it is inadequately captured in tools that assess eligibility for official development assistance (ODA).

SIDS' emerging challenges in environmental protection and planetary sustainability

- 5.2** Climate change impacts are growing in severity and frequency, and they are interacting with existing social and economic vulnerabilities to exacerbate inequalities within SIDS. Escalating environmental challenges are also worsening debt sustainability, raising concerns around long-term financial stability. Fisheries, a vital sector of the economy in most SIDS, are also coming under increasing threat from a combination of climate change, illegal fishing and weak global governance.

Policy recommendations for environmental protection and planetary sustainability

- 5.3** The emerging blue economy provides a significant opportunity for SIDS to gain recognition and remuneration for their management of vast ocean spaces. SIDS are custodians of globally significant biodiversity and ocean ecosystems; through the blue economy they can sustainably manage this environment and receive financial benefits for their work.

5.3.1 SIDS should look to work with partners to acquire finance and technical support to capitalise on blue economy opportunities. Building partnerships and developing and utilising new technologies will allow SIDS to be at the forefront, shaping this new sector.

5.3.2 Knowledge-sharing between SIDS is vital for technology transfer, lesson-sharing and developing a collective cohesive framework, to ensure the sector is developed in a sustainable way with equally shared benefits. Working collectively also ensures SIDS remain key norm entrepreneurs in this space, embedding SIDS' values and perspectives in international frameworks.

- 5.4** SIDS have played a significant role in shaping international dialogues, frameworks and agreements in the environmental sustainability arena more broadly, particularly in relation to climate change. Their moral leadership in this regard embodies the value of SIDS internationally. Island nations should continue to prioritise innovation, collaboration, diplomacy and moral leadership so they remain at the centre of these global conversations.

5.4.1 The value of SIDS to the broader international community is evident in their environmental protection and stewardship, innovation and advocacy. SIDS frequently develop novel conservation, adaptation and financial solutions that are replicated elsewhere.

- 5.5** SIDS policy-makers should draw on the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction as a structured approach to integrate resilience-building and risk-informed decision-making across national development strategies. This will ensure adaptation and preparedness are incorporated as central pillars of sustainable development. Investment in early warning systems, and the integration of Indigenous and traditional knowledge into these, will benefit SIDS' disaster preparedness.

- 5.6** SIDS are adapting to the lack of available financing for climate adaptation and sustainable development initiatives by designing and implementing their own unique mechanisms. SIDS' financing mechanisms are gaining interest. These institutions, created by SIDS for SIDS, carry significant potential to overcome many of the barriers to accessing common and traditional finance sources. SIDS should continue to invest

in and promote these options, and they should collaborate with other SIDS to establish and share learnings from successful initiatives. These mechanisms can provide much needed predictable and grant-based funding for resilience projects, while novel debt relief mechanisms provide an avenue for SIDS to increase their disaster resilience.

- 5.7** Nature-based solutions and community-driven initiatives continue to show promise across SIDS in tackling environmental challenges and in promoting positive socioeconomic outcomes for local communities. SIDS policy-makers should continue to invest in and empower local communities to implement these measures, while ensuring rigorous frameworks exist for monitoring and evaluation.

Chapter 6. Advancing the means of implementation: structural solidarity for resilient prosperity

SIDS' special circumstances in advancing the means of implementation

- 6.1** SIDS' tireless work to secure recognition of their special circumstances has been supported in some instances. But, too often, acknowledgement has been symbolic without tailored follow-up support. Implementation and practical assistance are limited, and SIDS remain structurally excluded from the international economic rules and decision-making that most affect their development prospects.

SIDS' emerging challenges in advancing the means of implementation

- 6.2** SIDS are facing rapidly worsening financial constraints due to repeated shocks, heavy indebtedness, declining donor support and reliance on excessively high-cost borrowing. These challenges are becoming greater as climate change accelerates and as geopolitical shifts reduce aid budgets and lead to transactional allocations and relationships.

Policy recommendations for advancing the means of implementation

- 6.3** Partners can provide the best support to island nations through SIDS-led, context-specific and tailored assistance. Adapting financial, technical and capacity solutions to the unique circumstances of each state is vital to maximise the benefits of assistance.
- 6.3.1** SIDS expend considerable time and resources trying to access climate finance, particularly from multilateral climate funds. Island nations should advocate for simplified approval tracks to reduce the strain felt by states with limited institutional capacity.

Given the structural constraints within SIDS, reducing the administrative burdens attached to international climate finance institutions will have greater impact for SIDS than providing capacity-building support.

6.3.2 Innovative finance mechanisms may remedy some financing gaps in SIDS, but these solutions are not accessible to all. Technical expertise and financing from development partners are still a substantial barrier for many. While there have been isolated successes for some SIDS, overcoming these barriers is vital to scale up these options. Mechanisms should be tailored to provide appropriate and accessible support for SIDS-specific contexts.

6.3.3 Technical support is of high importance and value for SIDS, yet it currently aligns poorly with government priorities. Short project cycles and consultant-driven interventions do not match SIDS' needs and they limit long-term outcomes. Reliance on external consultants prevents the development of expertise within internal systems, while programmes focused on building institutional capacity often ignore structural issues such as brain drain, weak statistical systems and difficulties in regional cooperation. Efforts focus on measurable outputs and donor reporting cycles, rather than long-term investments in institutions, culture or social transformation. Interventions providing technical and capacity support must be responsive to SIDS' needs, with priority given to longer-term projects that embed institutional knowledge.

6.3.4 SIDS should continue to advocate for and engage with the SIDS Centre of Excellence. This new initiative has the potential to advance common agendas for many SIDS and to overcome shared structural constraints.

- 6.4** There is growing political momentum around debt innovations, including Climate Resilient Debt Clauses (CRDCs) and debt-for-nature swaps. SIDS should continue to push for more creditors to adopt these approaches. However, more ambitious and systematic debt cancellation mechanisms are still needed.
- 6.5** While SIDS have demonstrated past successes in shaping global norms and processes, fragmentation limits their ability to coordinate, share best practice and influence broader global agendas. Therefore, stronger institutional architectures are needed to facilitate SIDS cooperation and to support continuous engagement, knowledge-sharing and strategic coordination.
- 6.6** As SIDS' vulnerabilities intensify, it is vital to achieve decisive reforms in the international financing architecture, genuine inclusion in global rule-making and robust local systems. Many SIDS will be further marginalised without these transformational shifts.

Chapter 7. Conclusions: advancing the SIDS agenda in a ‘self-help’ world

SIDS’ special circumstances

- 7.1 The challenges facing SIDS will intensify over the coming decade as SIDS and the global community implement and respond to the Antigua and Barbuda Agenda for SIDS (ABAS).¹ Their secure future will be threatened by increasing geopolitical tension and military conflict, declining economic openness, the reshoring of supply chains, reduced development cooperation and cuts to international aid, and intensifying climate change and potential overshoot. Strong defence of the SIDS special case will be vital to achieve sustained development.
- 7.2 This defence rests on two facts. The first is the sudden, disproportionate, excessive and unfair costs of exogenous shocks for SIDS. The second is the global value that SIDS provide as custodians of biodiversity, providers of climate leadership, designers of transitional technologies, producers of cultural heritage and generators of institutional legitimacy. Abandoning support for SIDS would result in losses for the whole of humanity.

Policy recommendations

- 7.3 It is vital that policy-makers implement integrated, multisectoral approaches to address the substantial and growing challenges that SIDS face, paying attention to underlying structural and engrained societal causes. This requires a foundation of inclusive governance, stronger institutions and better data.
- 7.4 Resilience is being undermined by the structure of SIDS’ economies. Therefore, when looking to diversify, SIDS should focus on new growth pathways that enhance self-sufficiency, equity and quality of life.
- 7.5 Novel and innovative solutions are emerging to many of the structural challenges that SIDS face, but there are failures in implementation. These are rooted in misaligned global systems of finance, data and governance. International models systematically underestimate both the needs and the contributions of SIDS, leading to chronic underinvestment.

1 United Nations Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States (2024) The Antigua and Barbuda Agenda for SIDS (ABAS) 2024–2034: charting the course toward resilient prosperity. Outcome document of the 4th International Conference on Small Island Developing States 2024. St. John’s, Antigua and Barbuda, 27–30 May (<https://www.un.org/ohrrls/sites/www.un.org.ohrrls/files/abas-booklet.pdf>).

- 7.6 In calculating value, we must rethink what counts: natural, social and care-based contributions need to be considered. This will reframe SIDS from low-productivity economies to high-value systems.
- 7.7 The central task for SIDS and their partners is not simply to manage vulnerability, but to reposition these island nations as high-value contributors within a rapidly changing global order, while simultaneously transforming domestic development pathways away from extractive, fragmented and under-resourced models. This will allow SIDS to achieve more resilient and sustainable futures.



SIDS Future Forum 2026. Photo: RESI/Wilton Park.

1. INTRODUCTION: THE SIDS SPECIAL CASE UNDER PRESSURE

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In October 2025, in a matter of hours, Hurricane Melissa caused damage across Jamaica costing more than 40% of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) ([World Bank, 2025](#)). One of only two Atlantic hurricanes in history to make landfall while sustaining winds of 300km/hr, it was more powerful than Hurricane Katrina and as fast as a Japanese bullet train.

The devastation wrought by Hurricane Melissa came after a painful decade of austerity. Jamaica had made enormous sacrifices to reduce a debt burden from a peak of 147% of GDP in 2013 to 62% on the eve of the disaster ([Bishop and Lindsay, 2024](#)). Not only is this achievement likely to be undermined, but it highlights the impossible choices facing Small Island Developing States (SIDS). Even with exceptionally tight fiscal policy, these nations remain at the mercy of externally imposed catastrophes whose staggering costs – aside from some limited contingency financing and insurance payouts – they are largely expected to bear alone ([Wilkinson et al., 2023](#)).

SIDS therefore pay multiple times over.

They carry the initial opportunity cost of foregone development spending and missed growth. They pay for recovery that often requires expensive borrowing, usually via private capital markets at excessive commercial rates, just to return to square one. And they face a subsequent debt mountain that, in turn, limits fiscal space and constrains future development options, all while waiting for the next externally driven disaster ([Hurley et al., 2025](#)).

Today, Dominica is still struggling with a public debt pile in excess of 90% of GDP, almost a decade after Hurricane Maria wiped out 226% of GDP; and in Fiji, debt levels rose from a moderate 46% of GDP in 2018 to 83% of GDP by 2021, three years after three tropical cyclones hit the island ([Hurley et al., 2024](#)).

But these figures tell just part of the story of the vulnerability of SIDS. Not only do larger states never face impacts on this relative scale – the COVID-19 pandemic was costly for the United Kingdom but only to the tune of around 10% of GDP – SIDS face them *repeatedly and at intensifying scale*. Events like Hurricane Melissa and Hurricane Maria will become more frequent, more severe and more costly as global temperatures continue to rise. And this is a problem that SIDS have done nothing to create, yet whose consequences they repeatedly suffer.

Their outsized vulnerability is why, since the first United Nations (UN) SIDS Conference that promulgated the 1994 Barbados Programme of Action, the UN has considered SIDS a 'special case for sustainable development' ([Bishop et al., 2025](#)). This status has been reasserted many times over, most recently in 2024 at the Fourth UN SIDS Conference (SIDS4) under the Antigua and Barbuda Agenda for SIDS (ABAS) ([UN-OHRLLS, 2024](#)). However, the special treatment that such a status implies has not often been forthcoming, and SIDS' special case is increasingly questioned by some nations, meaning it is under threat. SIDS are still waiting for international mechanisms, processes and funding to be able to resolve the consequences of their special circumstances.

Box 1.1 UN Small Island Developing States

Definition

SIDS are a distinct group of 39 states and 18 Associate Members of UN regional commissions that face unique social, economic and environmental vulnerabilities. The three regions in which SIDS are geographically located are the Caribbean, the Pacific, and the Atlantic, Indian Ocean and South China Sea (AIS).

SIDS by region

Caribbean: Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Cuba, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Grenada, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago

Pacific: Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Micronesia (Federated States of), Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste, Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu

AIS: Cabo Verde, Comoros, Guinea-Bissau, Maldives, Mauritius, São Tomé and Príncipe, Seychelles, Singapore

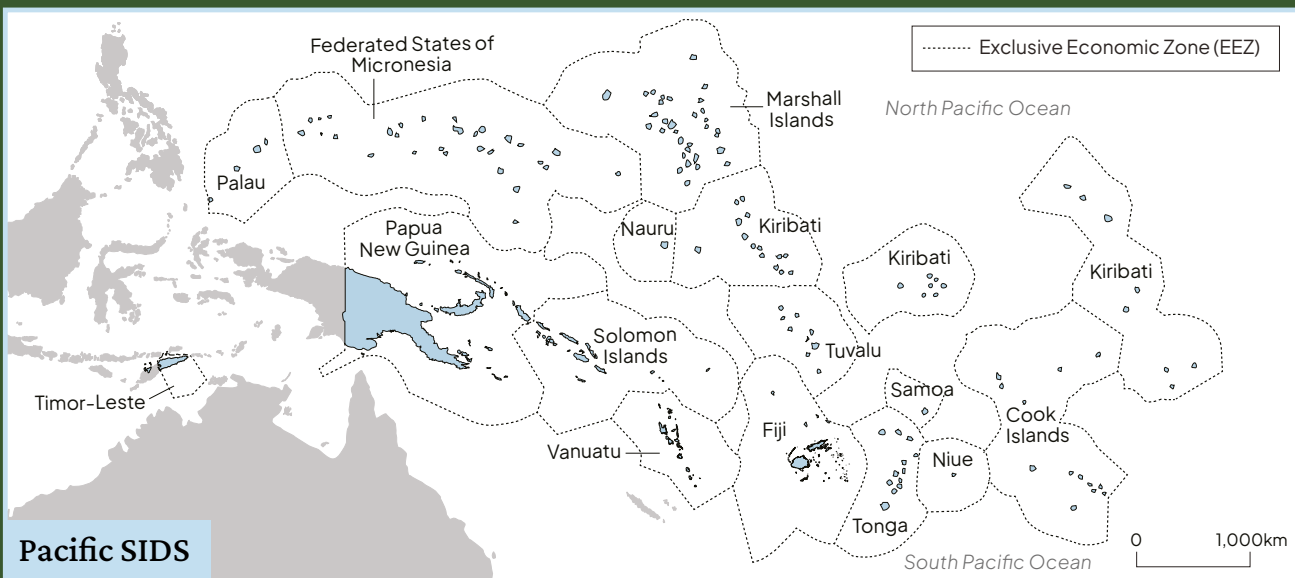
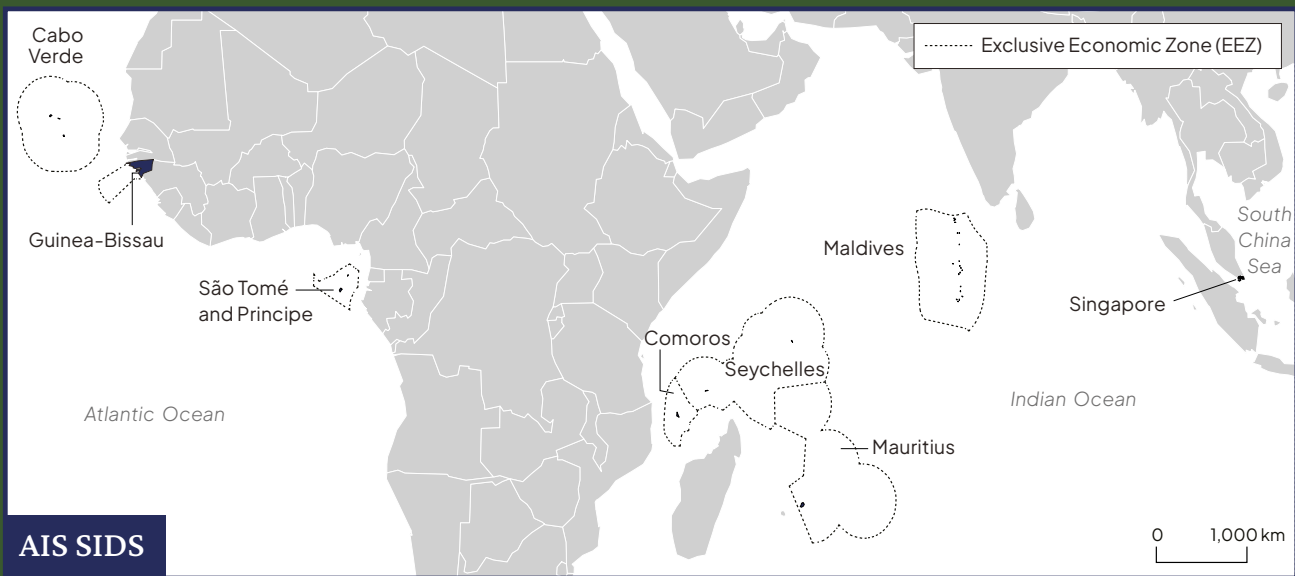
Associate Members of UN Regional Commissions: American Samoa, Anguilla, Aruba, Bermuda, the British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands, Commonwealth of Northern Marianas, Curaçao, French Polynesia, Guadeloupe, Guam, Martinique, Montserrat, New Caledonia, Puerto Rico, Sint Maarten, Turks and Caicos Islands, the U.S. Virgin Islands

The special case

‘Small island developing States, and islands supporting small communities are a special case both for environment and development. They are ecologically fragile and vulnerable. Their small size, limited resources, geographic dispersion and isolation from markets, place them at a disadvantage economically and prevent economies of scale’ (UN, 1992: ch.17, section G).

Source: UN (n.d.).

Figure 1.1 Map of Small Island Developing States by region



SIDS are now at a critical juncture. For more than three decades, recognition of their special case has rested on a broad consensus that smallness, remoteness and islandness generate distinctive development challenges. But this has always been contingent on the political support of other nations. Today, this support is being tested by three converging pressures: intensifying climate risks, tightening development finance, and a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape in which the assumptions and institutions of the post-Cold War era are being reconfigured.

As great power competition is reasserted and new claims to ‘special circumstances’ proliferate among other states, SIDS must once again demonstrate why their unique circumstances matter – not only for their own development, but for the integrity of multilateralism itself.

The state of SIDS report 2026: defending the special case (SSR2026) contends, therefore, that defending and advancing the SIDS special case is more difficult yet more necessary than ever.

The SSR2026 addresses the immediate challenge of progressing the ABAS two years since it was endorsed at SIDS4 in St John’s, Antigua, while situating its implementation in a broader story of structural change within the international political, economic and environmental order. It argues why the SIDS special case must be preserved, how SIDS might be better served by a multilateral system more responsive to their needs, and what can be learned from expert knowledge

on issues within (and beyond) the ABAS about possible pathways and options for policy-making.

This introductory chapter:

1. asks whether and how the special case might now be under threat and it explains why this must be defended
2. examines how the global order is changing through geopolitical upheavals, economic transformations and the imminent breaching of climatic tipping points associated with ‘climate overshoot’ ([Ritchie et al., 2021](#); [Reisinger et al., 2025](#)), which together are reconfiguring the context in which SIDS pursue their objectives
3. explores what SIDS want and how available options might be pursued within that context, while also outlining how SIDS themselves are advancing new development models grounded in resilience, equity and innovation
4. elaborates a framework for demonstrating the global value of SIDS, emphasising how their contribution to global public goods and institutional legitimacy is simultaneously substantial but under-acknowledged; and points towards a potential defence of their special case, grounded in the idea that any diminution of those benefits represents a net loss to humanity
5. argues that evidence-based advocacy – of the kind embodied in this report – is essential to ensuring that SIDS continue to shape, rather than be marginalised within, the evolving international system.

1.1 Why is the SIDS special case under threat?

The idea of a ‘special case’ for sustainable development has long rested on a broad, if uneven, recognition that smallness and islandness generate structural development constraints that are qualitatively and quantitatively distinct from those faced by larger states. These constraints – high exposure to external shocks, limited economic diversification, high per capita infrastructure costs, geographic isolation and acute environmental vulnerability – are frequently recounted for the simple reason that they generate a unique set of challenges.

SIDS face the omnipresent threat of developmental gains being decimated and decisively wound back. This is what vulnerability means.

The argument has never been that SIDS cannot achieve high levels of growth, development or social progress (Bishop, 2012). The point is that, because they face shocks that can wipe out entire territories or an entire year’s GDP almost instantly, SIDS face the omnipresent threat of developmental gains being decimated and decisively wound back. This is what vulnerability means. It is not about weakness or poverty or underdevelopment; concepts with which it is often (wrongly) conflated. It simply implies *a relative level of exposure to exogenous shocks that is disproportionately greater than – and therefore inconceivable – in larger states.*

This notion has underpinned recognition of the special case, which has itself become embedded in the institutional fabric of global governance over several decades. But the special case has also never been entirely uncontested, and today it is under renewed and significant pressure, for both political and material reasons. The timing of this is not coincidental, but it is paradoxical: *political* contestation of the SIDS special case is occurring precisely when its *material* basis is intensifying. This means some are seeking to deny the idea that SIDS are uniquely constrained at the same moment that the world transitions into a scenario where the consequences of their distinctive constraints are likely to become increasingly pronounced due to more frequent and more destructive shocks. Let us briefly discuss each dimension.

Politically, the return of great power competition within international relations is potentially undermining the multilateral consensus that has enabled the SIDS agenda to gain traction over three decades (Corbett et al., 2021). During the post-Cold War period, SIDS asserted their claims for so-called special and differential treatment within international institutions (Lindsay, 2019). While their agenda has always been contested in practice by some, there has at least been a general sense that SIDS’ demands were legitimate, worth pursuing and could, in theory, generate special treatment attendant with their broadly accepted unique circumstances. However, today, a considerably more fragmented and transactional global order is emerging (Cooper et al., 2025).

Aftermath of Hurricane Melissa, Kingston, Jamaica, October 2025. Photo: Deron Levy/Shutterstock.com.



This shift matters for SIDS more than for any other group of states because widespread recognition of their special circumstances can no longer be taken for granted (Bishop et al., 2025). Their development trajectories have been shaped, to a significant extent, by the concessions, preferences and support that has flowed (albeit partially and unevenly) from multilateral recognition of their uniqueness. Even where – quite often – special and differential treatment has not been forthcoming, there has remained broad acceptance of the merits of the special case on which SIDS have anchored their *pursuit* of such support.

Without widespread acceptance of this agenda, SIDS face a more uncertain future. Development progress may slow and reliance on predictable, rules-based international

support may give way to more discretionary, politically contingent arrangements shaped by the interests of larger powers.

Materially, the SIDS special case is also intensifying. Put more simply: their case is under threat at the very moment that it is most acutely evident.

The vulnerability-resilience framework, which has dominated the Small State literature since the 1990s, emphasises that SIDS are uniquely exposed to exogenous shocks on a scale disproportionate to their economies or territories (Briguglio, 1995; Bishop, 2012; Bishop et al., 2021). Whether in the form of global financial crises, pandemics that immediately halt tourism in countries with few other sources of foreign exchange earnings, or extreme weather events that devastate

entire national infrastructures in hours, these shocks frequently generate losses amounting to huge fractions – or even multiples – of a single country's GDP.

Such shocks can bring about daunting levels of indebtedness and capital costs that nations are saddled with for many years. Effectively, they can induce 'lost decades' in development that are no fault of the governments in power ([Bharadwaj et al., 2023](#); [Hurley et al., 2025](#)). No other group of states has to face this kind of ever-present systemic threat, which might instantly and decisively undermine developmental progress. While their timing and extent may be unpredictable, for SIDS, these shocks are not aberrations but structural features of their developmental landscape.



Filming Climate Blueprint, Efate, Vanuatu, 2025. Photo: RESI/Ben Merker, Merk Films.

SIDS' vulnerabilities are now being amplified by accelerating climate change, marine degradation and other environmental pressures. Plus, increasingly frequent and intense shocks are occurring alongside a tightening of development finance and emphasis on income-based metrics – notably gross national income (GNI) per capita – that obscure underlying vulnerability ([Bishop et al., 2023](#)).

The adoption of the Multidimensional Vulnerability Index (MVI) by the UN General Assembly in 2024 reflects frustration with these metrics, which fail to capture the precariousness of development gains in SIDS ([UN, 2024](#); [Sooksripaisarnkit and Tateno, 2024](#)). The MVI is an enormous achievement: it is the outcome of a longstanding and sustained SIDS-led agenda, and a clear example of their demands being realised multilaterally ([Wilkinson and Panwar, 2023](#)). However, the MVI is also a universal – not special or differential – index. This was a key element of the political compromise required to bring it into existence ([Bishop and Wilkinson, 2023](#)). Implicit in it is the idea that all developing countries can, in theory, be vulnerable, which opens up the possibility that a 'special' characteristic of SIDS might be shared by others.

Ostensibly poorer and larger countries have always pointed to the relatively high levels of GNI per capita in many SIDS, while the latter have rightly argued that this is an anachronistic measure of development in general and especially so in SIDS where vulnerability persists ([Bishop et al., 2021](#)). Now, other country groupings are advancing their own claims to 'special circumstances', often drawing on similar arguments regarding vulnerability and need. In part, this is because

the technical compromises required to operationalise the MVI were such that many non-SIDS appear to be vulnerable too ([Bishop and Wilkinson, 2023](#)). Of course, it is important not to discount the very real development challenges many face, including, in some cases, significant exposure to shocks. But genuine vulnerability – understood as frequent episodes that can generate disproportionate losses of entire territories or hundreds of percent of GDP – is not a defining feature of other groups of states in the way that it is for SIDS. The upshot is that, more and more, SIDS leaders and negotiators must defend and substantiate their status in ways unseen for several decades.

The ‘special case’ is no longer a settled feature of the international system. Defence of it, and adaptation of it to new global realities, has become an urgent priority.

And now the pressures SIDS face are being compounded by shifts in development assistance. Recent aid cuts globally, alongside a reorientation of donor priorities towards security and defence, have reduced the availability of concessional finance. Simultaneously, there is growing rhetorical emphasis on reducing aid dependence, even as the costs imposed on SIDS by external pressures rise. The convergence of these trends – geopolitical fragmentation, intensifying climate change and institutional contestation – marks a key point for SIDS. The ‘special case’ is no longer a settled feature of the international system. Defence of it, and adaptation of it to new global realities, has become an urgent priority.

1.2 How is the global order changing?

The SIDS special case is inseparable from the broader evolution of the international system. Its emergence and institutionalisation were distinctive products of the post-1945 multilateral order: a system of institutions, rules and norms consciously designed to constrain state behaviour and promote collective public goods. Indeed, it was only under such a system, which inhibited imperialist tendencies prevailing in the centuries beforehand, that smaller countries – let alone the very smallest – could survive, and even thrive, as independent states ([Sharman, 2017](#)). This system rested on the premise that embedding power within multilateral institutions could mitigate conflict and enable cooperation, generating ‘club’ benefits that would, in the aggregate and over time, outweigh the costs of compliance with shared rules ([Ruggie, 1992](#)).

SIDS found both voice and opportunity within this order. The principle of sovereign equality, institutionalised in forums like the UN, provided a platform for SIDS to exert their influence to a far greater extent than that implied by their size and non-existent brute power. The expansion of global trade, financial flows and development assistance further enabled many SIDS to achieve relatively high levels of economic and human development, despite enduring structural constraints.

However, the promise of post-1945 multilateralism has always been partial ([Muzaka and Bishop, 2015](#)). The system fundamentally relied on the willingness and capacity of the US to act as a guarantor. This required US commitment to the system itself, as well as to the liberalism and multilateralism

at its core, which simultaneously provided policy space for others while constraining its own unilateral action. Tensions inevitably appeared as successive US administrations oscillated between adherence to, and deviation from, the rules they helped to establish (Cooley and Nexon, 2020). Interventions ranging from Grenada to Iraq and, most recently, Venezuela and Iran, illustrate the persistence of coercive power within an ostensibly rules-based system. As such, multilateralism has been neither as liberal nor as orderly as its proponents have often claimed.

These contradictions have become considerably more pronounced of late. In the co-authored book, *Sustaining development in Small Islands* (Bishop et al., 2025), which was written around the time of SIDS4, the team at the Resilient and Sustainable Islands Initiative (RESI) discussed the potential return of a more fragmented ‘self-help’ system. Outcomes are determined by the preferences of larger players aggressively throwing their geopolitical weight around, to the detriment of the shared values, negotiated agreements and multilateral institutions that offer smaller players wider choices than might otherwise be the case. In the intervening two years since publication, the sense has grown that this is a new reality.

The resurgence of nationalist populism, intensified geopolitical rivalry and strategic competition among major powers appear to be accelerating a shift away from multilateralism. Developments such as Brexit, Russia’s war in Ukraine, changing dynamics in US–China relations, and the more assertive interventionist foreign policy evident during Trump 2.0 all signal broad reconfiguration of

global politics. In this emerging order, major powers are pursuing regional spheres of influence, often at the expense of multilateral norms and even international law.

This presents a complex landscape for SIDS.

In the immediate term, geopolitical competition can drive attention and resources, particularly in strategically significant regions such as the Pacific and Indian Ocean, and potentially even in the Caribbean (Waqavakatoga et al., 2024). However, any benefits are likely to be uneven, contingent and short-lived, and they may come with severe constraints on already limited policy autonomy. The risks are certainly significant. Great power dominance could entail the establishment of military bases, the militarisation of entire island regions, and even the re-emergence of overt imperial practices which currently persist in only a handful of island territories. This is deeply concerning for states that often lack standing armies and rely on international law and institutions for security.

This is not to say that alternative futures are impossible to conceive. Our recent RESI book argues that a renewed commitment to contemporary multilateralism or a shift towards a more ‘muscular’ form of liberalism could strengthen collective responses to global challenges. Of course, these challenges are not just geopolitical: the accelerating impacts of climate change and the prospect of climate overshoot where global temperature targets and tipping points are exceeded introduce additional uncertainty and risk. But ultimately, they will also exacerbate the troubling geopolitical picture as increased resource scarcity,

competition for rare minerals and climate-induced migration intensify in the coming years and decades ([Snell, 2026](#)).

The kind of expanded multilateralism that SIDS require to face these cross-border challenges is far from an easy sell at present. It would come with its own problems, not least the centralisation of decision-making in global bodies and reduced autonomy of smaller states, with global objectives potentially overriding national priorities ([Bishop et al., 2025](#)). Nonetheless, it is important to reiterate that, despite its imperfections, the post-1945 multilateral system has been more advantageous to SIDS than is often acknowledged, due to its relative ‘permissiveness’ ([Sharman, 2017](#)). Therefore, preserving and reforming this system – rather than abandoning it – remains a critical objective.

The kind of expanded multilateralism that SIDS require to face these cross-border challenges is far from an easy sell at present.

For SIDS, whose development trajectories are already constrained by geopolitical upheaval and environmental vulnerability, this represents an existential challenge. The ABAS ([UN-OHRLLS, 2024](#)) reflects awareness of these shifts. It calls for structural reforms in international support systems, including climate finance, debt sustainability and institutional capacity, alongside strengthened partnerships and data systems (UN, 2024; [Sooksripaisarnkit and Tateno, 2024](#); [Bishop et al., 2023](#)). The success of this agenda will depend not only on its technical merits, but on the ability of

SIDS and their partners to navigate and shape a rapidly changing global order in which past multilateral certainties might no longer be taken for granted.

1.3 What are SIDS’ development options?

As forbidding as the external environment unquestionably is, SIDS are not passive recipients of its effects. They have articulated clear and evolving development objectives, grounded in their longstanding advocacy on various issues and emerging opportunities for doing things differently. These objectives reflect a desire to build meaningful resilient prosperity, to promote transformation and to assert agency within the international system.



Ashley Lashley, COP30. Photo: The Loss and Damage Collaboration.

Representatives of the stakeholder community attending the SIDS Future Forum in London in early 2026 emphasised six broad priorities: diversification, self-sufficiency, extractivism, technology, knowledge-sharing, and voice and representation ([Wilton Park, 2026](#)).

Economic diversification remains central to this agenda. The structural constraints associated with small size and remoteness have historically limited SIDS to narrow economic activities, centred on tourism and financial services since the decline of export agriculture and the emergence of globalisation. These sectors have generated growth and, in some cases, notably high levels of human development. But they also expose SIDS to significant financial volatility. Diversification – into areas such as the blue economy, digital services and niche manufacturing – is therefore critical for resilience, but it has always been difficult given size-related constraints. So, SIDS are demanding new conversations about how to generate productive capacity by diversifying within sectors and into higher value-added segments of emergent ones.

Closely linked to diversification is the question of self-sufficiency. As climate risks intensify and global supply chains become more volatile, SIDS are exploring ways to strengthen domestic capacities in areas such as food, energy and critical infrastructure. This is not a call for autarky – something long considered inconceivable in highly open small-island economies ([Easterly and Kraay, 2000](#)) – but for a more balanced approach that reduces vulnerability to external shocks. It is also about reformulating SIDS economies

to better grow and retain human and financial capital to generate positive domestic and regional multipliers.

There is growing recognition of the need to address the enduring legacies and ongoing dynamics of extractivism, especially in the Caribbean. Many SIDS economies have been shaped by external actors extracting value from natural and human resources, often with limited local benefit beyond the creation of jobs or minimal tax revenue. Tourism and financial services, for example, enjoy explicit and implicit public subsidies, but their benefits are often captured and privatised by external actors while their ecological and human costs are socialised. At the same time – and as discussed in Chapter 2 of this report – an enormous amount of uncounted and free ‘socially reproductive’ labour is performed within island societies, usually by women, without which economies would cease to function. This is another form of extraction, as women internalise the costs of the ‘triple burden’ of domestic work and emotional labour on top of paid work. Valuing this labour in development models is crucial to ensure that gains are more equitably distributed and socially and environmentally sustainable.

Technological change presents challenges and opportunities. Rapid advances in digital technologies and artificial intelligence (AI) have the potential to overcome some constraints associated with small size and geographic isolation. By leveraging these technologies, SIDS can develop new economic sectors, improve service delivery and enhance resilience. However, this will require rapid investments in infrastructure, skills and governance. A key benefit of these technologies, from the small-island

perspective, is that they can overcome the primary constraint on development: limited human capital. In theory, automation of back-office administrative functions, if designed intelligently and carefully, can drastically reduce the associated transaction costs while increasing administrative capacity. SIDS are already capable of leveraging advanced technologies to create new products and deliver innovative services, due to their small size, agility, educated populations and high internet penetration. And they are well-placed to rapidly deploy digital skills and reform education systems. But speed is essential to move from the periphery to the mainstream of the global digital economy (Lindsay et al., 2025).

Another key priority is strengthening knowledge-sharing and cooperation among SIDS. The Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) does a remarkable job of knitting together many key global agendas, with its remit extending beyond a traditional focus on climate negotiations into myriad new policy areas while it grapples with resource and capacity constraints (Bishop et al., 2024). Alleviating these constraints is not easy: RESI has sought to contribute via the creation of our annual SIDS Global Leadership training course with the University of Malta. But more can be done. There is strong demand from stakeholders for the development and institutionalisation of new models and for denser intra- and inter-regional networks to facilitate the sharing of best practices, to support capacity-building and to enable a broader range of collective responses to shared challenges. Ideally, this should leverage other South-South cooperation and partnerships beyond SIDS, in order to enhance action within the multilateral system.

Finally, SIDS continue to prioritise voice and representation in international decision-making. Even as the multilateral system fragments to some degree, there is strong demand from island stakeholders to keep advocating for SIDS-centric reforms to existing institutions, as well as to explore new mechanisms that might better reflect their needs and priorities. There is, of course, much that donors can do to support here and many are doing important work to drive relevant conversations. The ability of SIDS to influence global agendas – from climate negotiations to oceans, development, financial reform and into softer areas like social policy – is essential for these nations to achieve their wider development objectives.

These priorities are reflected in the practical implications of preserving and advancing the SIDS special case.



Filming Climate Blueprint, Barbados, 2025.
Photo: RESI/ Ben Merker, Merk Films.

1.4 Where would humanity be without SIDS?

For good reason, defence of the SIDS special case is often framed in terms of vulnerability and need. But there are different ways to articulate it – to tell new stories that reinforce it intellectually while defending it politically.

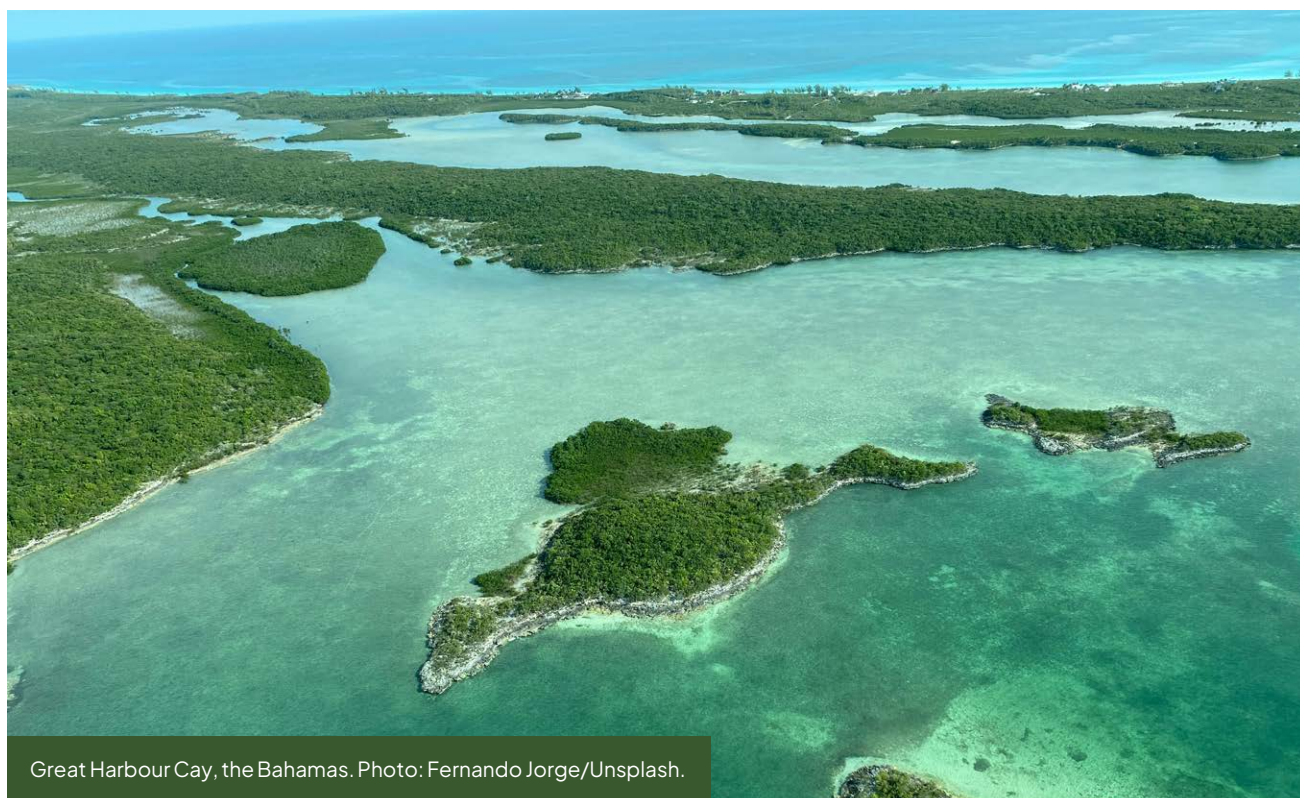
SIDS generate significant value for the global community. Protecting and enabling them is a matter of equity for some of the smallest players in the multilateral system and it is also of collective interest for all.

One aim of the SSR2026 is to pursue wider conversations that germinated at the 2026 SIDS Future Forum (Wilton Park, 2026). The

key entry point is that progress on each of the six priorities is contingent not on recognition of the special circumstances of SIDS per se, but on a deeper shared understanding and leveraging of what makes them truly unique.

So, vulnerability is far from the whole story. Moreover, focusing solely (or even primarily) on it risks obscuring a more fundamental point: SIDS generate significant value for the global community. Protecting and enabling them is a matter of equity for some of the smallest players in the multilateral system and it is also of collective interest for all.

One dimension of this value lies in the stewardship of global public goods. SIDS are custodians of vast ocean areas and critical ecosystems that are vital in regulating the earth's climate, in preserving biodiversity and in supporting livelihoods globally. The health



Great Harbour Cay, the Bahamas. Photo: Fernando Jorge/Unsplash.

of these ecosystems has implications far beyond national boundaries. Consequently, the combination of small size and deep connection to the ocean is a source of vulnerability *as well as opportunity*. Reframing this combination as an asset – as reflected in the growing discourse around ‘Large Ocean States’ (Chan, 2018; Pouponneau, 2023; Saddington, 2023) – opens pathways for thinking about SIDS leadership that can underpin new development trajectories and advocacy strategies.

SIDS also contribute significantly to cultural diversity and global heritage. Their histories, traditions and social structures enrich the global community and offer alternative perspectives on development, sustainability and well-being. In an increasingly homogenised world, this diversity is itself a valuable asset.

Economically, SIDS have demonstrated that small states can be innovative and dynamic. Despite structural constraints, many have achieved high levels of income and human development, illustrating what Briguglio (2003) terms the ‘Singapore paradox’ where vulnerability and high income coexist. While this may not be strictly paradoxical – there is arguably no reason why vulnerable countries cannot generate enviable levels of development – it underscores the capacity of SIDS to grow and build resilience, even if they are perpetually vulnerable to shocks that can undermine those gains.

And politically, SIDS have shaped global norms and institutions. Through collective action, they have successfully embedded their concerns within the international system,

influencing agendas on climate change, sustainable development and vulnerability (Corbett et al., 2021). They are also, by and large, among the most successful post-colonial democracies, exhibiting stable, consensual political practices that are the envy of much of the rest of the world (Corbett and Veenendaal, 2018).

In short, SIDS are emblematic of the diversity that underpins the international order. Like in all systems, whether technological, ecological, economic, political or social, this diversity is a major source of strength, without which it would tend towards a destabilising monoculture. The principle that states of vastly different sizes have equal standing – meaning that countries with populations of millions and those with populations of thousands have equal votes in the UN General Assembly – is therefore central, not incidental to the legitimacy of the international order.

SIDS are both architects and symbols of what post-1945 multilateralism sought to achieve. Their presence affirms the idea that the international system comprises diverse states with equal rights and responsibilities. Therefore, the potential erosion of the SIDS special case has implications not only for them, but for broader principles of collective action and solidarity that affect everyone.

Recognising their value in this way shifts the narrative from one of burden to one of opportunity in which greater support for SIDS is an investment in planetary health, cultural richness, economic innovation and global stability. This theme is returned to in Chapter 7, where, in light of the analysis

in the thematic chapters, the authors offer suggestions on how to pursue an agenda that highlights the global value of SIDS.

1.5 The SSR2026: defending the special case?

The SSR2026 is both a synthesis of evidence and a strategic intervention at a critical moment. It dovetails with the biannual SIDS Future Forum, the second of which took place at Wilton Park in the United Kingdom in January 2026, co-hosted by the RESI team and the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, with support from various SIDS stakeholders ([Wilton Park, 2026](#)).

RESI² is a scientific advisory network established by ODI Global in 2021 to bridge the gap between data, evidence and policy ([Bishop et al., 2021](#)). A report such as this was a key demand expressed by SIDS stakeholders at the first Future Forum in New York in March 2024. There, it became clear that an independent stocktake and synthesis of the voluminous academic and policy literature on SIDS was needed to render it comprehensible to practitioners and, hopefully, to support different dimensions of the global SIDS agenda ([Bishop et al., 2024](#)). This includes, but is not limited to, ABAS implementation.

The SSR2026 responds to a persistent gap between the growing body of research on SIDS and its inaccessibility to policy-makers. At the same time, it also makes a broader argument about the importance of defending and advancing the special case in an unstable international context.

Research on SIDS spans disciplines, institutions and issues, but this knowledge often has limited visibility among policy-makers, development partners and the specialised SIDS units within international organisations. This exacerbates the problem of lesson-sharing. In a context of severely constrained human resources and capacity within SIDS governments, regional organisations and other stakeholder institutions, the bespoke data analyses within the report offer a one-stop primer on many key debates, synthesising the latest academic and policy research.

Inspired by and modelled very loosely on assessment processes such as those of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the SSR2026 brings together leading scholars and practitioners to assess key themes aligned with the ABAS. Each chapter broadly corresponds to one ABAS chapter, reviewing conceptual debates, presenting current trends, and identifying data and research gaps. The report is also grounded in extensive consultation. Inputs were gathered from forums including the Global Sustainable Islands Summit in St. Kitts and Nevis, the Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction in Geneva, the UN Country Team retreat for Mauritius and the Seychelles, the Pacific Islands Forum in the Solomon Islands, side events at COP30 in Belém, and the SIDS Future Forum 2026 in the UK. These engagements ensure that the report reflects both academic insights and policy realities.

Beyond its analytical contribution, the SSR2026 advances a normative argument about the place of SIDS in the

international system. It emphasises that SIDS are custodians of global public goods, contributors to cultural diversity and independent members of the international community whose preservation matters intrinsically. Defending the special case is therefore about sustaining a vision of the international system in which diversity is valued, vulnerability is addressed collectively, and even the smallest states can prosper. This vision is encapsulated in the ABAS, which calls for structural reforms to international support systems and a renewed commitment to partnership and cooperation (UN-OHRLS, 2024).

Defending the special case is therefore about sustaining a vision of the international system in which diversity is valued, vulnerability is addressed collectively, and even the smallest states can prosper.

The SSR2026 provides the evidence base for this vision. By synthesising existing knowledge, identifying gaps and highlighting best practices, it supports those seeking to advance the SIDS agenda in a rapidly changing global context. The report also reinforces the importance of collective action, solidarity and cooperation in the face of shared challenges. In this way, the report contributes to a broader effort to ensure that SIDS continue to shape, rather than be shaped by, the evolving international order. At a time when the principles underpinning that order are under strain, defending the SIDS special case is an

immediate necessity and it is a statement about the kind of world that should emerge from this period of uncertainty.

1.5.1 How to read the SSR2026

Each chapter uses the UN definition of SIDS (UN, n.d.), looking for patterns, themes and similarities across these countries. Some chapters focus on specific SIDS regions, reflecting the availability of and trends in that literature, as well as the interests and expertise of the authors. Where specific examples are given, they usually highlight emerging best practice from which other SIDS may be able to draw lessons. These chapters should be read as an expert synthesis of the state of a given field, rather than an exhaustive documentation of policies and projects across all SIDS.

The report can be read cover to cover. But it is also written so that policy-makers and practitioners can read specific chapters – or just dip into individual sections of those chapters – depending on their interests. This means some overlap and repetition is unavoidable. A topic like the availability of potable water, for example, is an equity, security and environmental issue. Other cross-cutting issues abound (just as they do, of course, across the ABAS chapters). If topics appear to be missing from one chapter, they are likely contained in another.

The SSR2026 is accompanied by a 'Summary for policy-makers' written by a committee of RESI Directors and SIDS policy-makers. This highlights key trends and recommendations stemming from each chapter and can be read as a stand-alone report.

Each chapter should be read as an opportunity to *think with* the emerging findings of academic research rather than the last word on the topics covered. The translation and application of academic knowledge for and to policy is necessary but it is fraught with complexity. A synthesis will always be distinct from what is ‘really’ happening on the ground. There will inevitably be gaps and omissions. The authors have worked hard to put together diverse authorial teams for each chapter that balance regional and thematic expertise. But no team, however well-constituted, can know absolutely everything there is to know about a given issue, and their own interests and deliberations will have guided their analysis and pushed it in particular directions while closing off other avenues. This is precisely what makes the report analytically useful and interesting.

Timelines matter too: this synthesis is up to date at the time of writing, but the research it is based on has likely taken years to undertake, analyse and publish. Overall, the knowledge presented here is both fundamentally critical and important, but it must be absorbed with care and caution.

The SSR2026 has been compiled the old-fashioned way with authors reading the research themselves. AI has been used to assist in compiling the Reference lists. In some chapters, authors have also used AI to fine tune their writing, including syntax and grammar. The data visualisations are original to this report, based on data compiled and analysed from open access sources. The figures and data files are also available on the RESI website – resi-initiative.org.



SIDS Future Forum 2026. Photo: RESI/Wilton Park.

1.5.2 The SSR2026 chapter summaries

The SSR2026 is structured around the five ABAS themes, which broadly reflect academic disciplines. This means it is implicitly grounded in predominant debates and concepts. It has also allowed our authors to identify knowledge gaps and how they might be filled to the benefit of the ABAS. The chapters cover multiple regions and countries, but they cannot document each piece of research across all SIDS countries. They highlight patterns and themes. For more specific insights, readers can consult the extensive Reference lists, which detail all papers reviewed for this report.

Chapter 2 elaborates an agenda to move SIDS economies from short-term survival to long-term resilience and prosperity. This agenda recognises persistent structural challenges such as high trade costs, narrow economic bases and vulnerability to external shocks, while engaging in integrated, cross-sectoral planning to exploit emerging opportunities in ocean-based sectors, sustainable tourism, aquaculture, agriculture, digital services and the creative economy. The authors emphasise a need to rethink diversification – within sectors, beyond traditional metrics of growth, centring climate resilience (Mohan et al., 2025) – and to ensure that new development pathways enhance rather than undermine quality of life.

Chapter 3 argues that achieving resilient social prosperity in SIDS depends on addressing deep-rooted inequalities and strengthening the social foundations of resilience, including in health and education systems, social protection and community well-being. The authors highlight how

the pursuit of flourishing SIDS societies is fundamentally inhibited by deepening inequalities of all kinds which derive from the gendered distribution of power within island communities, and by growing poverty and exclusion (Panwar et al., 2024). Addressing these issues requires integrated, multisectoral and intersectional strategies that link individual experiences to structural dynamics. It also requires stronger political commitment, improved governance and investment in social protection, while recognising and redistributing care work.

Chapter 4 argues for a more integrated approach to energy, water, infrastructure, security, and transport and market connectivity. This is because failures in one system can cascade across entire economies through spatial concentration and limited redundancy. The authors highlight how these policy domains are technical, social and political challenges too: past decisions and institutional constraints can ‘lock-in’ suboptimal systems. Overcoming these challenges demands deliberate, coordinated transformation by committed leaders and nimble governing systems, rather than incremental change.

Chapter 5 explains why it is impossible to separate questions pertaining to environmental sustainability from the wider SIDS development agenda, given their disproportionate exposure to accelerating climate change and their role as custodians of globally significant biodiversity and ocean ecosystems. The authors highlight the strong need for integrated systemic approaches that link climate action, disaster risk reduction and biodiversity conservation (including nature-based solutions, ecosystem management and early warning systems), while ensuring

that global frameworks and agreements support, rather than undermine, the interests of SIDS. Realising this means emphasising the risks that potentially ensue from agreements and processes that facilitate the problems they purport to solve, from ocean-grabbing to greenwashing.

Chapter 6 argues that the means of implementation for SIDS to meet their development objectives as set out in the ABAS is a central constraint on all other policy domains. Access to concessional finance is a cornerstone issue. SIDS face worsening fiscal constraints due to repeated shocks, heavy indebtedness, declining donor support and reliance on excessively high-cost borrowing, even as emerging tools such as the MVI begin to challenge traditional GNI-based allocation systems (Hurley et al., 2024; 2025). Solutions include a growing interest in innovative financing instruments. Although uptake remains limited – often due to donor-driven design and questions of scalability – this highlights the need for more appropriate and accessible mechanisms that work with the grain of SIDS’ capacity constraints and local practices.

Chapter 6 also introduces the ODI–RESI SIDS Perceptions Survey (Panwar et al., 2026). This survey, the first of its kind, sought the views of SIDS policy-makers about the donors who support them. It shows what SIDS value, from and by whom, and why. Key findings include the popularity of the Green Climate Fund (GCF), despite access challenges; the diversity of donors between the three SIDS regions; and the unmatched influence of China across the entire SIDS group.

Chapter 7, the Conclusion, grapples with the question of how to draw attention to fundamental vulnerabilities while also highlighting the inherent value of SIDS for the international system. This is the core conceptual challenge for the SIDS agenda. The labels ‘SIDS’ and ‘Large Ocean States’ are emblematic of these different framings. The former is key to generating much needed finance, but it is unravelling because it relies heavily on the duty implied by norms currently being eroded by the return of self-help politics. The latter provides a positive rationale for investment in SIDS, but it struggles to attribute responsibilities and financial obligations from historical injustices and climate threats. Managing these imperatives is key to SIDS’ success over the life of the ABAS and beyond.

2. RESILIENT ECONOMIES: INCREASING PRODUCTIVE CAPACITIES IN A SELF-HELP WORLD

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Summary

Integrated, cross-sectoral planning and innovative financing are absolutely necessary to move Small Island Developing States (SIDS) beyond short-term survival towards sustainable structural transformation.

SIDS are at the forefront of debates around global economic resilience, balancing intrinsic vulnerabilities – their small size, geographic isolation and extreme climate exposure – with capacity to exploit economic niches.

Tourism, offshore banking and other financial services have brought SIDS considerable economic success over recent decades. But COVID-19 exposed the limits of these models. Diversification has proven to be an elusive goal and, in its absence, SIDS economies are struggling to achieve genuinely sustainable development due to their exposure to external shocks.

The problems SIDS have confronted in diversifying their economies have led to a renewed focus on self-sufficiency, especially since the pandemic. But this is not

fully reflected in the Antigua and Barbuda Agenda for SIDS (ABAS) ([UN-OHRLLS, 2024](#)). This Agenda argues that the structural challenges to economic growth and sustainable development include lack of data, insufficient technical and institutional capacity for decision-making, poor connectivity (in some cases) and inadequate access to global supply chains. So, while the ABAS outlines where SIDS should focus their attention, it also welcomes the support of the international community in developing and expanding these capacities and sectors.

This chapter is organised around four interconnected pillars – *productive capacities, trade and investment, resilient and sustainable tourism, and sustainable ocean-based economies* – all central to the sustained (and sustainable) development of island nations.



2.1 Key debates

The core debates on economic resilience in SIDS highlight the severity and interconnected nature of their structural vulnerabilities. There is consensus across academic and policy research: incremental, siloed approaches cannot address the complex nature of economic crises in SIDS, which are triggered by external shocks but compounded by local economic development models.

The return of a ‘self-help system’ – where multilateralism is declining and the special case of SIDS is increasingly under threat (Bishop et al., 2025) – limits the adoption of traditional economic solutions. These generally involve greater openness and integration and will therefore be progressively harder to achieve.

In the emerging reality, SIDS can no longer rely on the same level of multilateral concessions and support that previously underpinned their development trajectories. Instead, the geopolitical transition is placing a greater burden on SIDS to build internal resilience while navigating a less certain and less open international environment.

One response to this shift is a return to the older concept of economic self-sufficiency as a critical dimension of resilience against accelerating climate risks. For SIDS, self-sufficiency translates into the intentional strengthening of productive capacities, trade and investment, resilient tourism and the blue economy to reduce dependency on volatile external systems. Achieving this

amid the return of great power competition will require deeper collaboration and knowledge-sharing among island nations on successful business models, adapted financial innovations and effective tourism restructuring. SIDS must also cooperate with neighbouring larger states by diversifying both products and partners so they can better reap the benefits of trade and investment within the self-help system.

The blue economy presents a huge opportunity for SIDS economies to achieve economic self-sufficiency; however, it is also a key arena where the self-help system manifests. There is an urgent need for SIDS to assert sovereignty over their Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), but they will need to collaborate with other SIDS and with development partners to capitalise on this. SIDS must use diplomatic and legal channels – which are currently being eroded by the return of self-help – to secure their maritime territories, but this remains more challenging in certain regions than others. This reinforces the emerging paradox of SIDS development: inter-state collaboration has become more significant for securing economic growth at the precise moment that it is becoming increasingly difficult to achieve.

2.1.1 SIDS economies

SIDS have a unique economic profile, distinguished by specific and well-known structural constraints. These constraints are shared by islands, despite considerable variation in economic performance and gross domestic product (GDP) per capita³ across subregions (Figure 2.1). They all

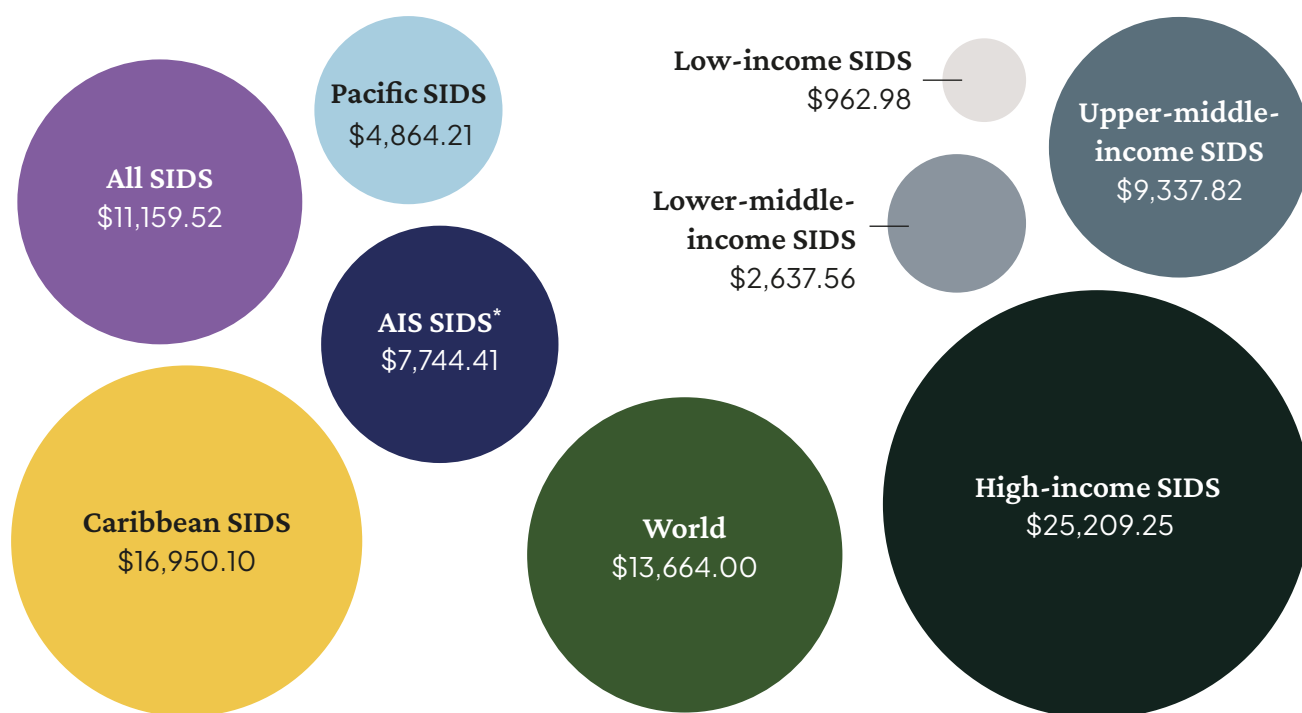
3 Although useful, GDP per capita (like gross national income (GNI) per capita) remains an incomplete measure of economic progress in SIDS. For more detail, see Bishop et al. (2021).

relate to inherent smallness and a limited resource base, which restrict market size and economies of scale, in turn leading to higher operational costs and constrained economic diversification.

SIDS' scale limitation, combined with geographically dispersed populations across multiple remote islands, means smaller markets and a high cost per capita to deliver public services. This reality is reflected in government spending. Annual government expenditure and tax revenues as a share of GDP are typically about 8% higher among SIDS than the world average (Figure 2.2), illustrating the elevated cost of maintaining state capacity.

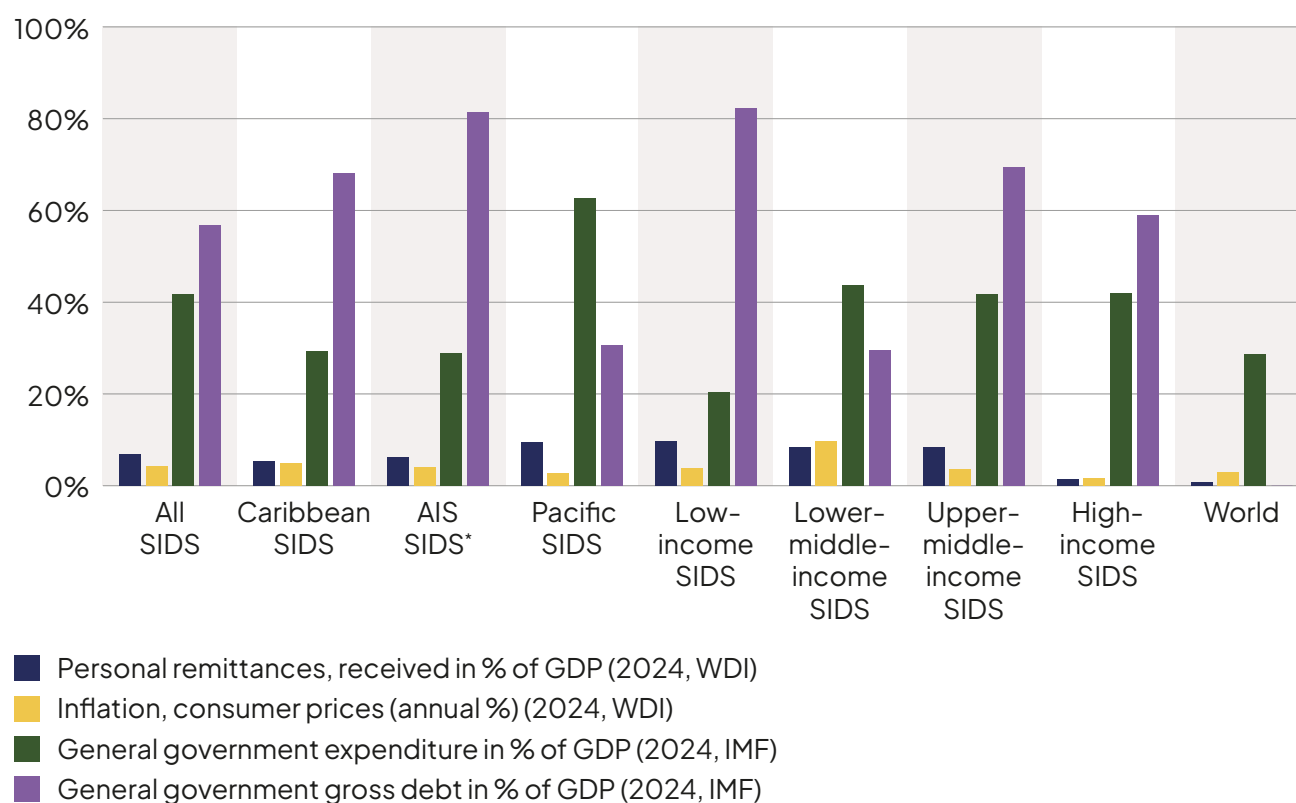
Remoteness and isolation impose other burdens too, notably high transportation costs and supply chain uncertainties. SIDS rely on trade for income and this dependence – coupled with a high reliance on imports (especially for food and fuel) – makes them vulnerable to external shocks and price volatility. This exposure results in high domestic inflation: annual inflation in SIDS was 11.1% in 2023, with Caribbean SIDS experiencing rates above 20.5% in 2023 before declining in 2024 (Alleyne and Blagrove, 2025).

Figure 2.1 GDP per capita, 2024 (US\$, purchasing power parity, PPP)



Note: *Excluding Singapore. AIS = Atlantic, Indian Ocean and South China Sea.

Source: World Bank (n.d.), World Development Indicators (<https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators>), 14 November 2025.

Figure 2.2 Selected macroeconomic indicators, 2024

Note: *Excluding Singapore. Country groupings are based on income levels using World Bank groupings. Data are not available for world average general government gross debt.

Source: World Bank (n.d.), World Development Indicators (<https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators>); International Monetary Fund (2025), World Economic Outlook database (<https://www.imf.org/en/publications/weo/weo-database/2025/april/download-entire-database>), 14 November 2025.

SIDS' economic vulnerabilities are further intensified by climate change, which undermines productive capacity and increases the cost of disaster reconstruction. From 2000 to 2022, annual economic losses in SIDS attributed to climate change alone amounted to US\$1.7 billion, representing 0.8% of collective GDP (Panwar et al., 2025). These figures contribute to already high debt levels. With government debt in SIDS standing at around 67% of GDP on average (Figure 2.2), close to half of all SIDS are assessed as being at high risk of, or already in, debt distress (Hurley et al., 2024).

That said, many SIDS have achieved high living standards through sustained economic growth. This has been supported by remittances, which constitute the largest source of external financing to SIDS and provide critical financial buffers (UNCTAD, 2021). They account for over 20% of GDP in Tonga, Samoa and Haiti (World Bank, 2022), with Tonga being the world's most remittance-dependent country at 50% of GDP.

2.1.2 Productive capacities

Strengthening SIDS' productive capacities is a central component of the ABAS. This

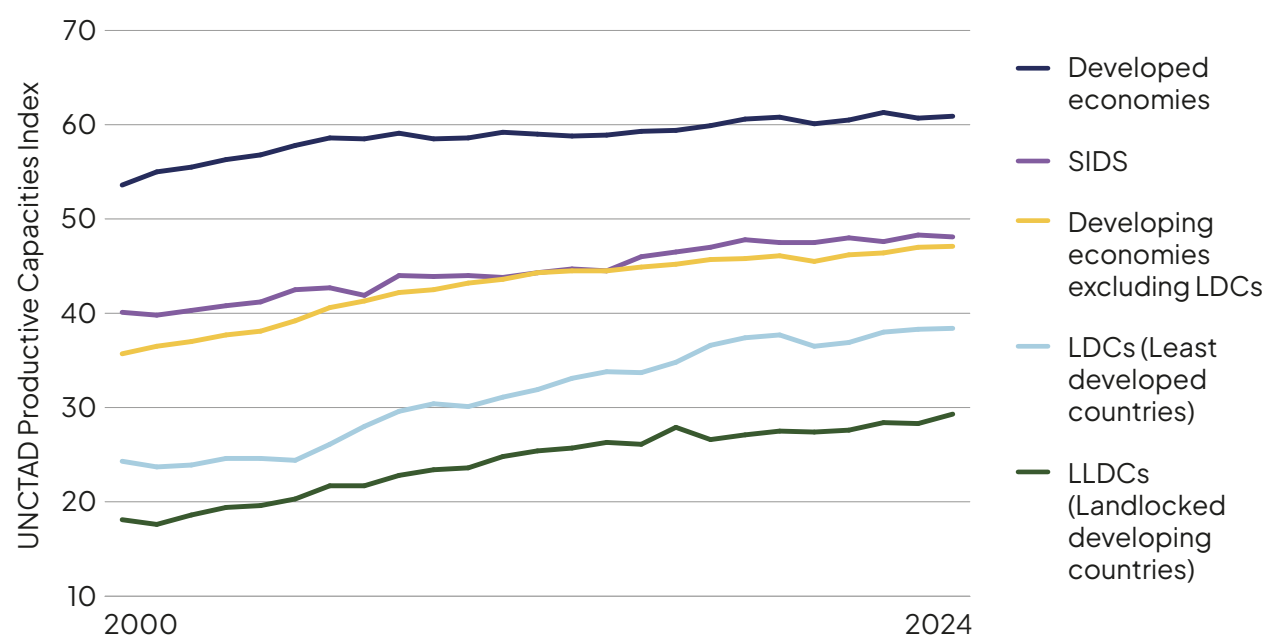
is structured around building resilient economies and creating productive populations. Specifically, the ABAS highlights the need for SIDS to invest in higher-productivity sectors, including advanced technologies and the digital economy, to reduce brain drain and promote better-paying jobs. It also calls for productive capacity to be expanded through holistic development programmes and national capacity gap assessments.⁴

Although the notion of productive capacities has long featured in the global policy agenda and in national development strategies, it remained undefined for many years. Over recent decades, however, the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) has

developed a comprehensive conceptual framework defining productive capacities as ‘the productive resources, entrepreneurial capabilities, and production linkages that collectively determine a country’s ability to produce goods and services for sustained growth and development’ (UNCTAD, 2025a).

UNCTAD has also developed the Productive Capacities Index (PCI), which enables the measurement and benchmarking of productive capacities across countries and regions. Several key insights can be drawn from this for SIDS. Although SIDS previously outperformed the developing-country average before the 2010s, their progress has since slowed and they now perform on a par with other developing economies (Figure 2.3).

Figure 2.3 Evolution of productive capacities across UN country groupings, 2000–2024



Source: UNCTAD (2025a).

⁴ See ABAS, sections 2.3 and 4.1 (or paragraphs 27–32 and 54–58) (UN-OHRLLS, 2024), which address the transformation of productive sectors and the promotion of skills and innovation for the digital economy.

This stagnation is partly explained by the recurrence of global shocks since 2010, which have disproportionately affected SIDS' productive capacities and have constrained their ability to recover or shift towards new development pathways.

The SIDS group is heterogenous in terms of productive capacities. It displays a wide spread of outliers, from economies at the top of the distribution such as Singapore, to countries at the lower end such as Haiti and Guinea-Bissau. Since 2019 and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, SIDS have also experienced markedly divergent trajectories, with several countries recovering and advancing significantly. This includes Kiribati, Guyana, Comoros, Grenada and the Dominican Republic. In contrast, Papua New Guinea, the Marshall Islands, Antigua and Barbuda, the Maldives, São Tomé and Príncipe, and Mauritius have seen flat PCI scores since the pandemic; Suriname, Haiti, Trinidad and Tobago, Cuba and Fiji have seen a decline.

Although natural capital is often abundant in SIDS, overexploitation and limited technical and financial resources make it hard to manage assets sustainably.

The PCI further breaks down productive capacities into eight categories: human capital, natural capital, energy, transport, information and communication technologies (ICTs), institutions, private sector and structural change (UNCTAD, 2025a; Bouhia and Delelegn Arega, 2026). Human capital in Caribbean SIDS is generally strong, but the region suffers from brain drain and

Filming Climate Blueprint, Barbados, 2025.
Photo: RESI/ Ben Merker, Merk Films.



small labour pools (Smith and Jules, 2025). Meanwhile, the Pacific islands struggle more with out-migration and maintaining a stable, skilled workforce (Ali et al., 2026). Although natural capital is often abundant in SIDS, overexploitation and limited technical and financial resources make it hard to manage assets sustainably (Batra and Norheim, 2022). Critically, access to finance is restricted by high borrowing costs and narrow fiscal bases (Hurley et al., 2025a).

Technology and innovation are vital for overcoming geographic isolation, yet most SIDS underinvest in research and development (R&D). The exceptions are Mauritius and Cabo Verde, which are leading digital initiatives (WIPO et al., 2024), plus Caribbean nations such as Barbados, which is striving to build digital hubs (WIPO et al., 2024). Pacific SIDS in particular face

significant hurdles due to poor infrastructure, although advances in areas like Fiji's fintech show potential. Fostering digital skills and investing in connectivity are essential for resilience, despite resource scarcity challenges (ITU, 2024).

SIDS also struggle to achieve economies of scale or attract diversified investment (Pomeroy, 2021). This is because SIDS are not well integrated in global production networks due to small domestic markets, high transport costs and limited bargaining power. To overcome this, island nations have specialised in niche sectors such as eco-tourism, fisheries and offshore financial services, with the latter providing a major source of revenue and employment in several jurisdictions over recent decades (Baldacchino, 2014; OECD, 2023). However, initiatives by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the G20 to curb tax avoidance and evasion, together with tax justice campaigns led by non-governmental organisations, have tightened regulation and increased compliance costs for offshore financial centres. This puts SIDS' development model under pressure (Johannesen and Zucman, 2014; Tax Justice Network, 2022).

At the same time, weak and costly connectivity continues to cap growth in both goods and services exports, despite efforts to deepen regional integration and invest in transport and digital networks (UNCTAD, 2024). Infrastructure remains a major bottleneck here: while some countries, such as Samoa and Haiti, have upgraded or rehabilitated roads and ports to improve resilience to extreme weather and maintain basic connectivity, infrastructure

gaps and maintenance backlogs remain large across states (OECD, 2023). These dynamics highlight two interlinked but distinct constraints on SIDS' productive capacities: weak production linkages into global and regional value chains, and chronic infrastructure deficits that raise transaction costs and limit the returns to private investment (UNCTAD, 2024).

Finally, strong institutional frameworks are essential to improve productive capacities, but these are often weak in SIDS due to limited administrative capability. Caribbean SIDS generally exhibit strong institutions but struggle with consistent implementation (Barrow-Giles and Marshall, 2018; Baldacchino, 2014), while Pacific Island communities rely on traditional systems amid weaker formal governance (Larmour, 2005). A core, cross-regional challenge that is noted particularly in the AIS region is the high cost per capita of running and maintaining the effective institutional frameworks necessary to foster productive capacities (Moncada and Nguyen, 2024). In all cases, capacity-strengthening initiatives are vital but require better tailoring to local imperatives (Wilkinson et al., 2025).

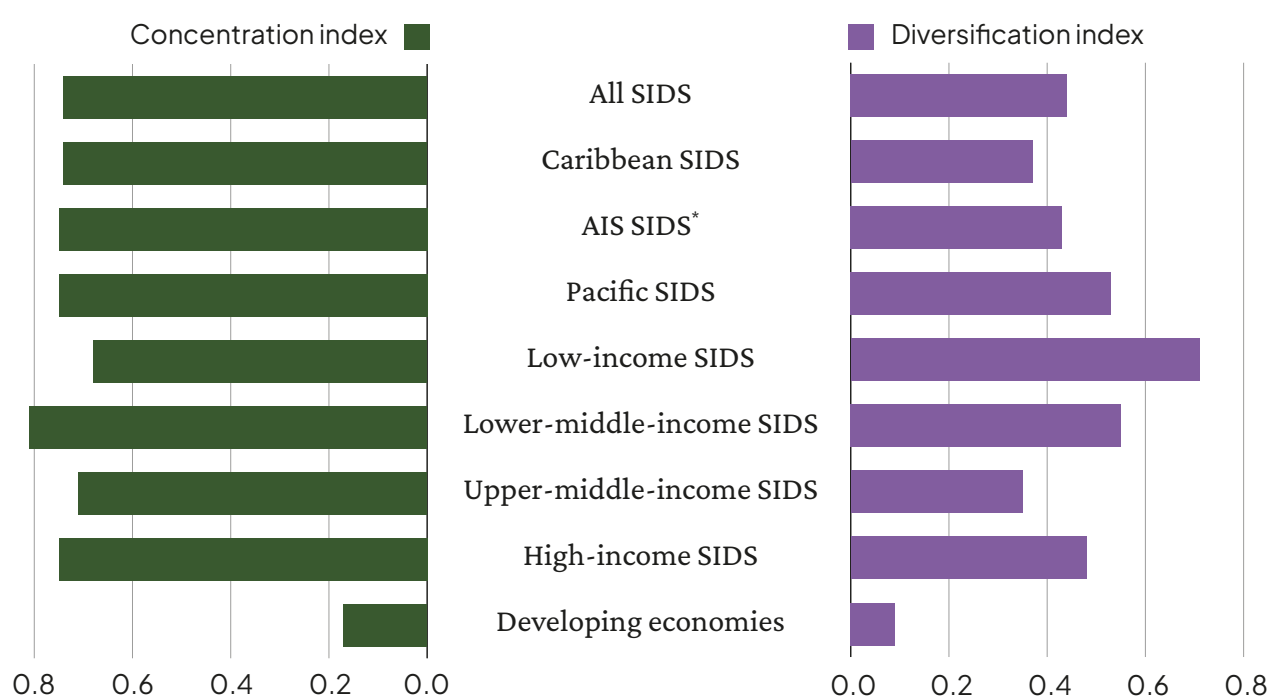
2.1.3 Trade and investment

Constrained by persistent structural vulnerabilities, SIDS' share of global trade remains low at only 0.8% (WTO, 2024). The global trading environment has intensified competition for SIDS due to the shift since 2008 from traditional non-reciprocal trade preferences (e.g., Lomé IV Convention) to reciprocal agreements (e.g., Economic Partnership Agreements). This demands compliance with stringent international standards despite limited national capacities.

Competition is structurally worsened by SIDS' lack of trade diversification. Exports are highly concentrated in a few products and their trade patterns are very different from global trade (Figure 2.4), making them more vulnerable to disruptions and shocks. Interestingly, there is little difference between income levels or

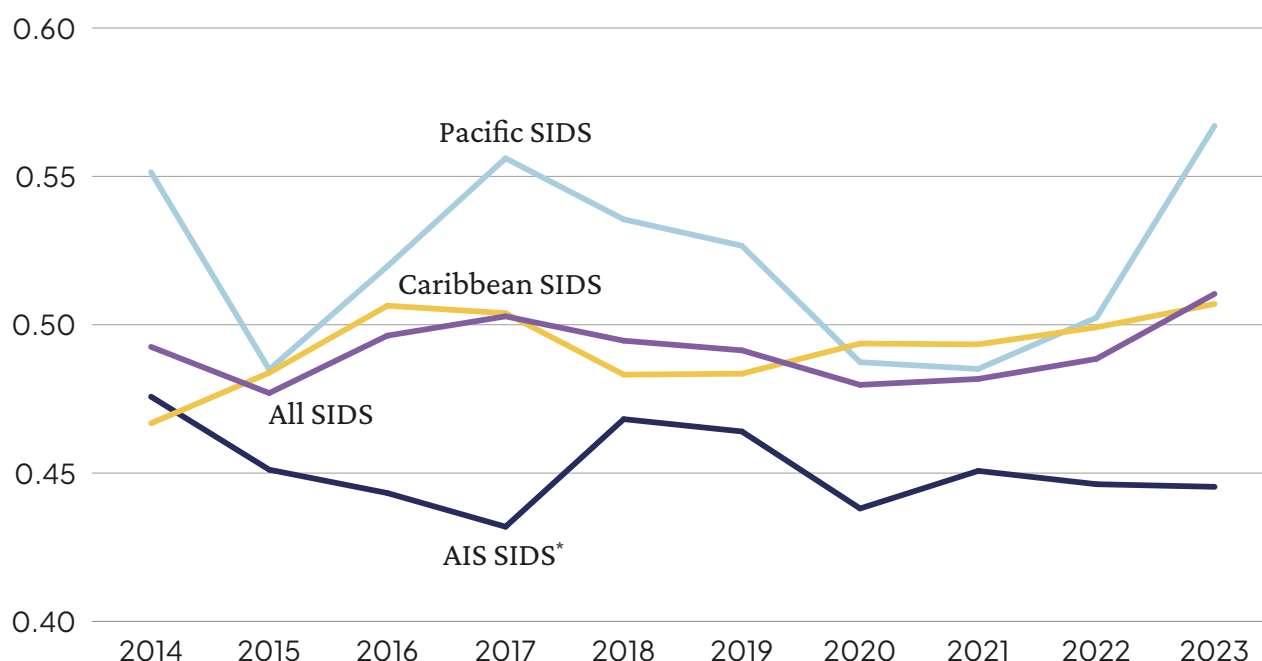
geographical groupings of SIDS, so even high-income SIDS are vulnerable to shocks and disruptions connected to trade. Relationships with trading partners do vary across SIDS, however. The Pacific SIDS are more reliant on a few trade partners, and their trade fluctuates a lot more than other SIDS (Figure 2.5).

Figure 2.4 Export concentration and diversification indices for merchandise, 2024



Note: *Excluding Singapore. Country income groupings based on World Bank groupings. The concentration index indicates the extent to which exports are concentrated in a small number of products versus even distribution across products. The diversification index measures how much the product structure of a country or group's exports differs from the global trade pattern.

Source: UNCTAD (n.d.) UNCTAD Data Hub (https://unctadstat-api.unctad.org/bulkdownload/US.ConcentDiversIndices/US_ConcentDiversIndices), 14 November 2025.

Figure 2.5 Export reliance on trade partners, 2014–2023

Note: *Excluding Singapore. The reliance ratio is calculated as the share of export value to trade partners on the total export value each year. Trade partners include Australia, China, Japan, New Zealand, the US and the European Union (EU). The data provide a harmonised view of both goods and services, the latter of which is the primary export engine for most SIDS. However, please note that trade in services data are subject to higher margins of error than merchandise trade due to measurement complexities and varying national reporting capacities. This may result in underestimations of service-based economic activity in regions with significant data deficits.

Source: OECD (n.d.) Balanced trade statistics (<https://www.oecd.org/en/data/datasets/oecd-balanced-trade-statistics.html>), 14 November 2025.

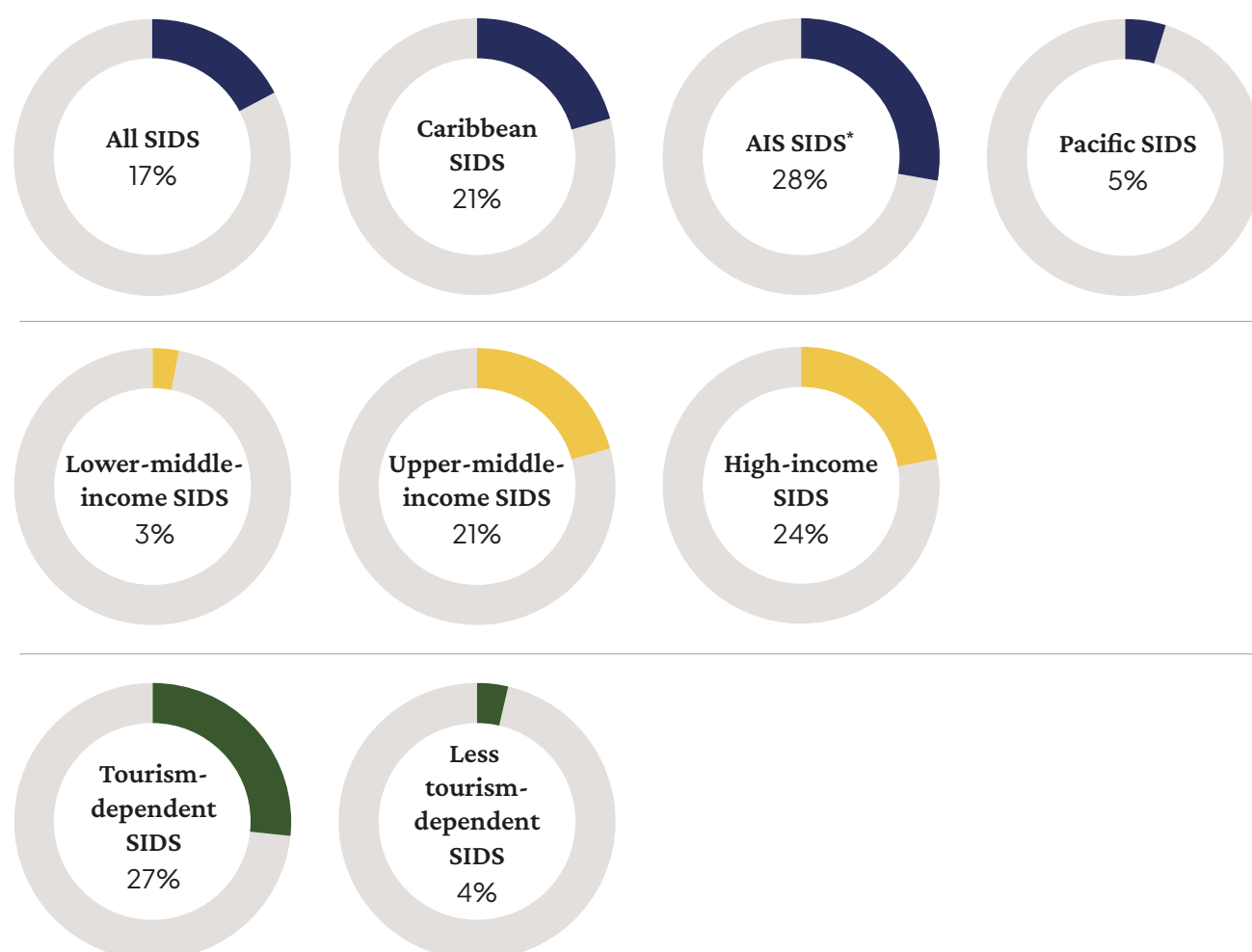
Within the World Trade Organization (WTO), SIDS are included under the broader Small Vulnerable Economies Work Programme (WTO, 2022). The Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) has advocated for more targeted forms of special and differential treatment for SIDS, including longer transition periods for implementing obligations (e.g., the Trade Facilitation Agreement), simplified notification requirements and greater policy space for subsidies in agriculture and fisheries (Ancharaz, 2019). Regional priorities vary significantly though. Pacific

SIDS tend to focus on managing their vast EEZs and climate-linked disciplines, supported by the 2025 Fisheries Subsidies Agreement (Hopewell, 2026); Caribbean SIDS prioritise flexibilities for services trade (tourism); and in the AIS region most are concerned with reducing high transport costs and strengthening digital trade capacity (Mooneeram-Chadee, 2025). Furthermore, countries like the Solomon Islands, Comoros and Haiti have pushed to maintain duty-free, quota-free access and flexible rules of origin as they face preference erosion.

SIDS' structural reliance on a narrow range of exports, often a single commodity like tourism, is compounded by high market concentration. This makes SIDS highly susceptible to external shocks and global economic downturns. Extreme exposure is evident in tourism-dependent SIDS, where the share of inbound tourism expenditure as a percentage of GDP is notably high (Figure 2.6). For example, in

2023, about 38% of export revenues in SIDS came from international tourism, a figure that reached up to 85% in some destinations (WTO, 2024). Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic caused international tourist arrivals in SIDS to decline by 76% in 2020 and 72% in 2021, resulting in an estimated US\$90 billion in lost tourism export revenues from 2020 to 2022 (ITC, 2024).

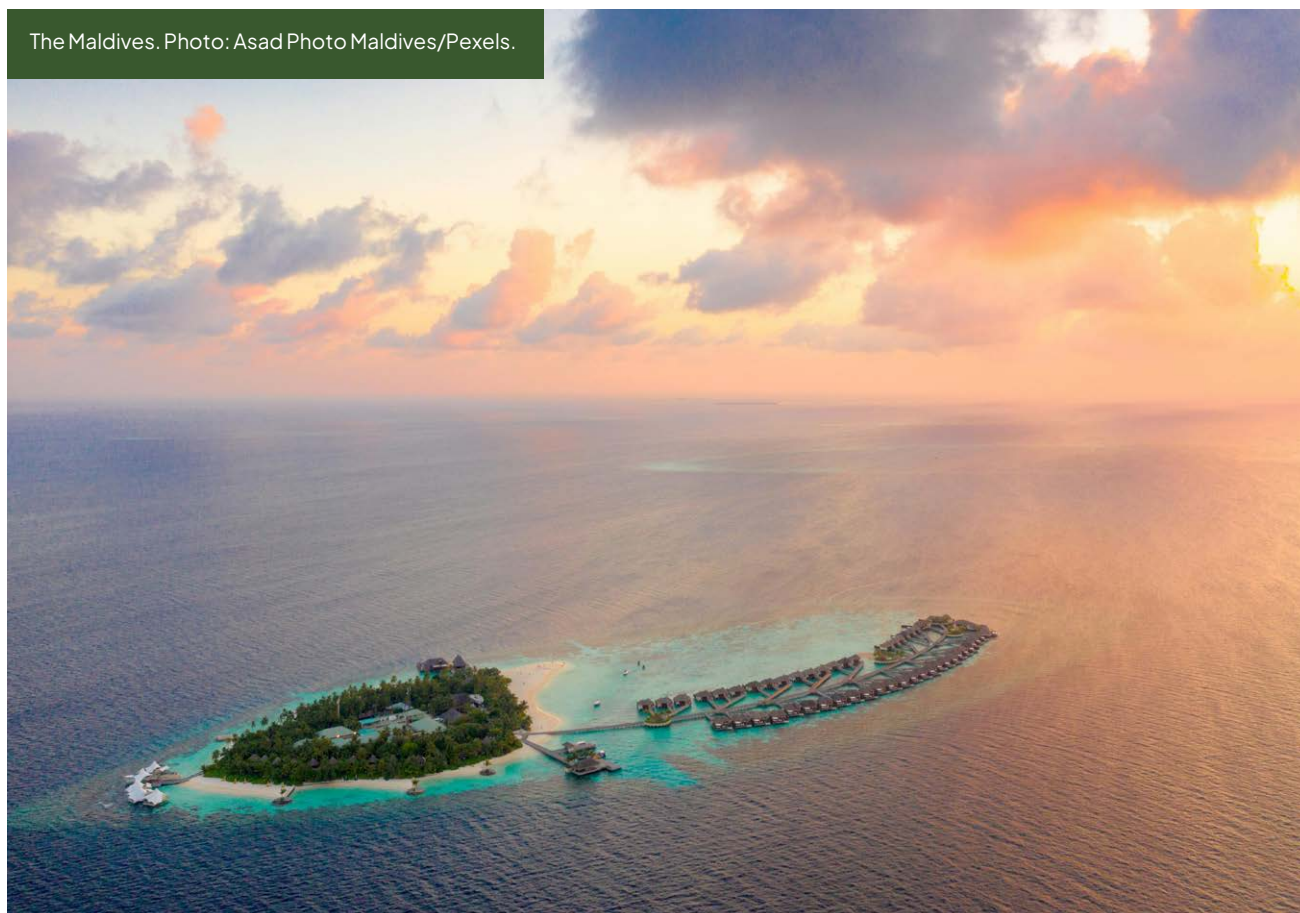
Figure 2.6 Share of inbound tourism expenditure, 2022 (% GDP)



Note: *Excluding Singapore. Tourism-dependent SIDS are those whose share of inbound tourism expenditures stood at over 20% of GDP in 2019. Ten are in the Caribbean, three in the AIS region and four in the Pacific.

Source: UN Tourism (n.d.), Tourism Statistics Database (<https://www.untourism.int/tourism-statistics/tourism-statistics-database>), 14 November 2025.

The Maldives. Photo: Asad Photo Maldives/Pexels.



Foreign direct investment (FDI) remains a crucial capital source for SIDS, particularly for tourism ([Read, 2008](#)) – though it can introduce a mismatch with long-term sustainable development goals if the investment prioritises short-term profit over the preservation of natural capital and social cohesion. This structural challenge has amplified the urgency for SIDS to diversify their export base and deepen regional integration. Intra-regional trade has increased by 35% (from around US\$11 million in 2015 to US\$15 million in 2024), with the largest rises seen in Pacific SIDS (57%) and Caribbean SIDS (18.4%) ([UNCTAD, 2025b](#)). Regional initiatives like the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) serve as models for advanced integration ([Didier, 2020](#)), which can increase bargaining power and reduce transaction costs ([Guerrero et al., 2009](#)).

SIDS are also leveraging digitalisation to reduce the barrier of geographic distance, creating new opportunities in digital trade and e-commerce. Examples range from Tuvalu's exploration of the metaverse to the anticipated US\$1 billion Jamaican e-commerce market ([UNDP, 2024](#)). Despite the potential for significant cost savings, hurdles remain though, including limited broadband, high internet costs and inadequate cybersecurity. Given these challenges, a central policy debate revolves around updating international trade frameworks to support SIDS' digital ambitions and granting the necessary special and differential treatment flexibilities for recovery and resilience-building after disasters ([OECS, 2018](#)).

2.1.4 Resilient and sustainable tourism

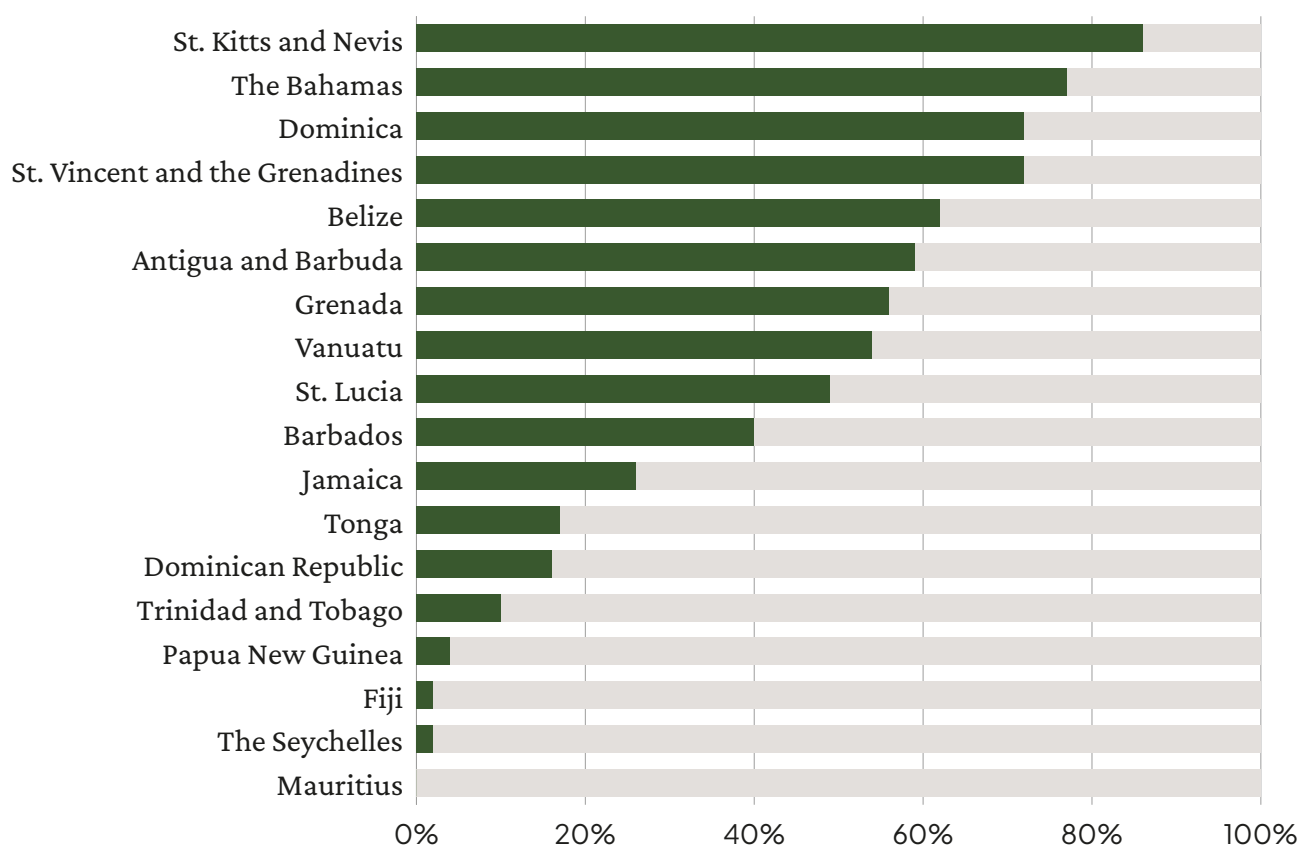
Tourism is a critical industry for many SIDS. But, despite being an economic powerhouse, the emissions related to visitor transport contribute to climate change (Wolf et al., 2024). In turn, this places tourism assets at risk (Wuddivira et al., 2023).

This dilemma demands a critical re-evaluation of tourism-led growth (Giampiccoli et al., 2021). The popularity of SIDS destinations can easily lead to over-tourism, resulting in unsustainable environmental and social effects. This is

especially problematic for more remote islands, such as those in the Pacific (Butler and Dodds, 2022).

Cruise tourism represents a significant portion of the visitor economy. This is evidenced by high figures for inbound tourism arrivals by water in the Caribbean (Figure 2.7), with select SIDS generating millions of US dollars in the 2023/2024 cruise year through taxes. However, the economic impact is often diluted when vessels spend little time in port and guests participate primarily in pre-arranged and paid-for excursions, limiting local business support (Hoarau-Heemstra et al., 2023).

Figure 2.7 Share of cruise ship visitors among total international visitors, 2022



Source: UN Tourism (n.d.), Tourism Statistics Database (<https://www.untourism.int/tourism-statistics/tourism-statistics-database>), 14 November 2025.

Taxation is an important policy tool to mitigate these negative externalities. In the Caribbean, the common practice of negotiating a per-person tourism ‘head tax’ (McLean, 2023) is often presented as a competitive ‘race to the bottom’. Conversely, channelling tourism-generated funds (like hotel or green taxes) towards conservation and infrastructure projects is often seen as more beneficial, though follow-through is crucial (Sridharan, 2025). For example, the Maldives only began earmarking its 2015 ‘green tax’ for environmental projects in 2019 (Shumais and Mohamed, 2020).

Policy-makers must ensure such measures address both fiscal effectiveness and social equity. This includes considering targeted tax relief, for instance reducing property taxes in port-adjacent neighbourhoods (del Saz Salazar and Tovar, 2026). This functions as a compensatory mechanism for local residents who bear the disproportionate hidden costs of large-scale tourism – increased noise and air pollution, traffic congestion, and the degradation of local amenities caused by heavy cruise ship traffic. By offsetting these localised environmental and social burdens, such fiscal adjustments help ensure that the economic benefits of tourism do not come at the direct expense of the community’s quality of life.

Several niche tourism models offer pathways to enhance sustainability and resilience. Slow tourism focuses on preserving local culture and food production (Walker and Lee, 2021), while creative tourism offers cultural learning experiences – though both risk commodification if they become too mainstream (Baixinho et al., 2020). The rise of digital nomadism post-pandemic has formalised remote work long-stays (Cook,

2023), but attracting these visitors requires that SIDS strengthen their infrastructure, including transportation links and internet connectivity (Zhou et al., 2024). Eco-tourism, which aims to contribute positively to conservation and community well-being (Das and Chatterjee, 2015), is often supported by certifications (Brown et al., 2021) but it remains vulnerable to greenwashing (Buckley et al., 2024). Research on Maldivian resorts indicates a difference in messaging, with high-end resorts often framing the natural environment as a luxury feature with less focus on practical sustainability practices (Galli et al., 2025). Finally, community-based tourism, which involves high local participation in low-density and low-investment models, supports more equitable outcomes (Giampiccoli et al., 2021), but barriers like a lack of decision-making structures and power disparities between stakeholders can still limit inclusivity (Reindrawati, 2023).

2.1.5 Sustainable ocean-based economies

The blue economy is an evolving concept that seeks to balance the pursuit of ocean-based economic activity – including established sectors like fisheries, coastal tourism and maritime transport plus new sectors like marine biotechnology – with the reduction of environmental risks and degradation (Smith-Godfrey, 2016).

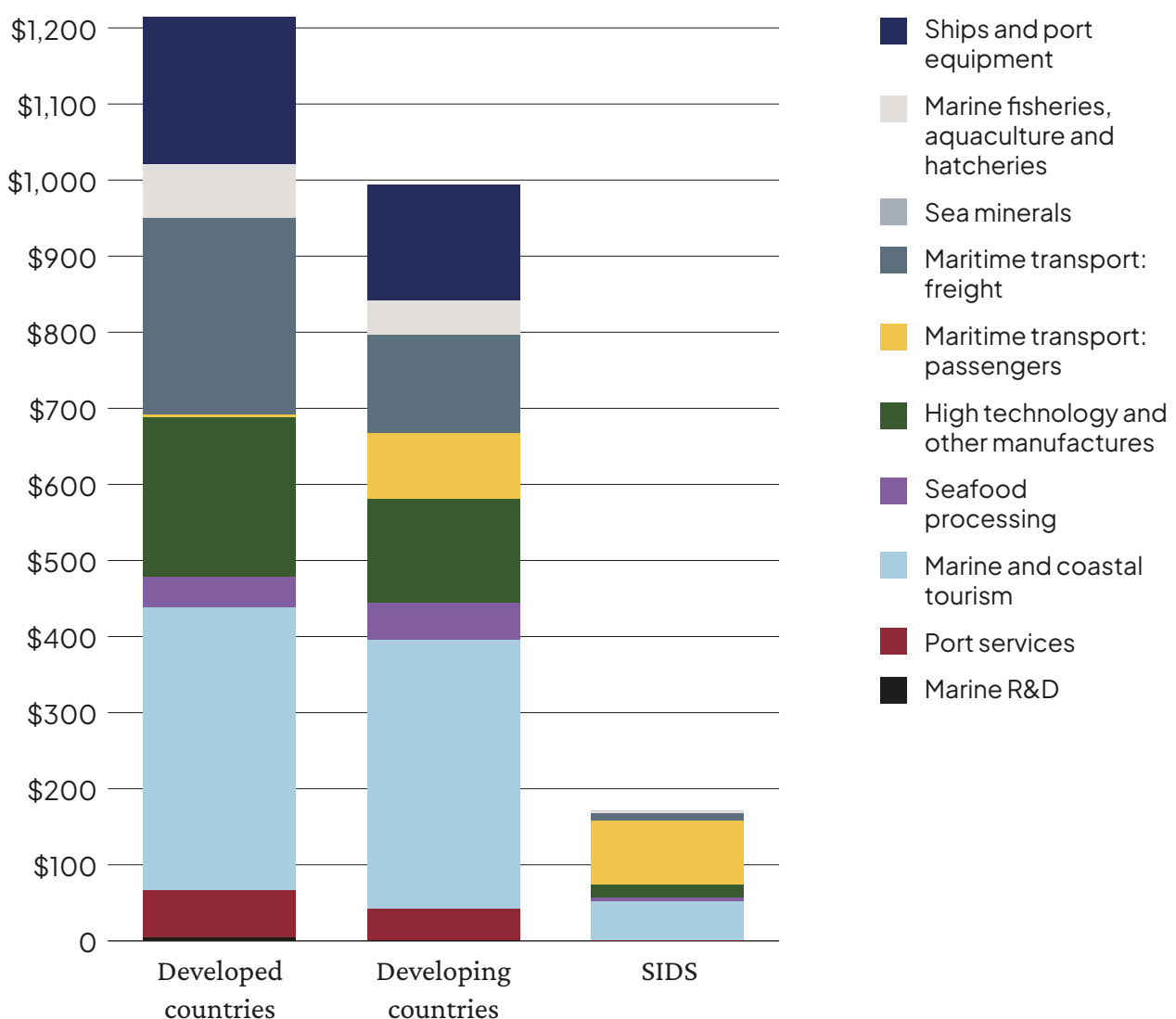
Despite the vast collective EEZ of SIDS, fewer than half of these island nations currently address the blue economy through national policy documents (Pouponneau, 2023). Furthermore, the development of coordinated policies is complicated by different interpretations of the activities encompassed within the blue economy.

The marine extraction of oil, gas and minerals is emerging as an area of contestation, for example ([Hassanali, 2020](#)).

The central challenge for SIDS is ‘ocean inequity’. In 2023, SIDS’ per capita ocean exports (comprising both goods and services) exceeded US\$2,600 – nearly 10 times the world average ([UNCTAD, 2025b](#)). While SIDS are by far the most dependent of all country categories on the ocean economy on a per

capita basis, deriving an average of 11% of GDP from the ocean, their ocean economies remain poorly diversified (Figure 2.8). For instance, 87% of SIDS’ ocean-related economic activity is concentrated in services currently, specifically coastal-related tourism ([UNCTAD, 2025b](#)). Such a high concentration in the tourism sector creates acute vulnerability to external and environmental shocks, limiting the ability of SIDS to benefit fully from the burgeoning global blue economy.

Figure 2.8 Diversification of ocean exports, 2023 (US\$ billions)



Source: Hurley et al. (2025b), extracted from UNCTAD Stat (2025).

This structural imbalance is further evidenced by the lack of participation from SIDS in high-tech ocean sectors. Industries such as offshore renewable energy and marine pharmaceuticals represent 16% of ocean-related trade globally and over 17% in developed countries, yet they account for only 9.7% in SIDS (Hurley et al., 2025b). SIDS' contribution to marine research and development is also negligible: of the 13,000+ patents associated with marine genetic sequences, only four originate from institutions located in SIDS (Blasiak et al., 2018).

For most SIDS dependent on imported fossil fuels, marine renewables offer a pathway to energy independence.

For hydrocarbon-rich SIDS like Trinidad and Tobago, a transition towards marine renewables ideally requires the incorporation of 'just transition' principles to ensure equitable access to energy and employment (Singh et al., 2023). However, much of the literature on this topic focuses on large, high-income countries with far greater adaptive capacity (Bishop et al., 2021). This presents an 'economic-climate justice dilemma' (Phillips, 2023) – the transition away from fossil fuel production in hydrocarbon-rich SIDS must be financed in a way that addresses their unique development and climate adaptation needs.

Conversely, for most SIDS dependent on imported fossil fuels, marine renewables offer a pathway to energy independence. However, key to catalysing such projects is the availability of early-stage funding and regional implementation programmes to allow SIDS to take advantage of economies

Filming ClimateBlueprint, Barbados, 2025.
Photo: RESI/ BenMerker, Merk Films.



of scale and enhance their bargaining power in negotiations with commercial entities (Appiott et al., 2014; Habib and Parris, 2025).

Fisheries remains a major economic sector, but smaller local fleets frequently face a significant competitive disadvantage against highly subsidised and industrialised foreign fleets (Hurley et al., 2025b). The sector is also linked to serious environmental challenges, including the proliferation of 'ghost' fishing gear, the escape of farmed species, chemical pollution and eutrophication at aquaculture sites (Maes and Messing, 2025).

Broader policy and diplomatic tensions are evident in international agreements such as the Parties to the Nauru Agreement (Aqorau, 2019), which has created the world's largest sustainable tuna fishery. They are also evident in the 2023 Agreement under the

UN Convention on the Law of the Sea on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ Agreement), which has revealed different views of fish species as a natural resource, a source of biodiversity for conservation or a source of genetic material for capitalisation (Sebuliba et al., 2025). Similarly, deep-sea mining shows how the short-term exploitation of natural capital can undermine long-term development goals, with the added risks of profound uncertainty regarding the state of socioecological systems and potential diplomatic disagreements across SIDS territories and regions.

2.2 Recent trends and contributions

There is global consensus on the need for a rapid transition towards high-value, diversified economies rooted in green and blue growth. Yet the path forward is increasingly obstructed by shifting geopolitics. Specifically, the return of great power competition undermines the multilateral institutions that once provided predictable support for SIDS and a stable system that encouraged inter-state cooperation.

The transition to a self-help system has seen the return of ideas and concepts that foreground economic self-sufficiency. These ideas have become especially salient post-COVID-19, due to the havoc wrought to SIDS economies by the closure of borders globally.

There are two versions of the self-sufficiency argument. The first and older meaning emphasises sacrifice: SIDS need to do more with less if they are to increase their resilience by decoupling from the global economy.

The second version does not imply isolation, but rather the intentional nurturing of internal strengths – specifically through productive capacities and resilient tourism – to reduce dependency on increasingly volatile external concessions. This latter approach is more in-keeping with the core tenets of the ABAS, but shifting geopolitics seem to be working against it.

Regional integration will be essential to navigate the self-help environment. Deeper integration has long been viewed as a panacea for SIDS development. But, too often, it has promised more than has been delivered (Bishop and Payne, 2010). This needs to change.

Firstly, intra-SIDS integration – that is, deeper collaboration among these island nations as a whole – is critical for knowledge-sharing regarding success stories, failures and best practices. This includes scaling effective business models to build productive capacities and deploying innovative financial tools adapted to the SIDS context. Secondly, strategic external integration – achieved by pursuing deeper integration with neighbouring ‘larger’ states and diversifying partners – can help diversify products and services. SIDS can better reap the benefits of global trade and investment while mitigating the risks of over-reliance on any single power.

The blue economy is a primary arena where the self-help system manifests. Consequently, SIDS must urgently assert sovereignty over their EEZs. Through diplomatic channels and legal frameworks – as demonstrated by Mauritius (see Box 2.2) – SIDS are securing their maritime assets, although the feasibility of such assertions is more challenging in some regions than

others. Similarly, the Pacific Maritime Security Programme is the latest version of a long-running initiative that pairs Australian naval capacity with SIDS' expertise to police the world's largest sustainable tuna fishery (Aqorau, 2019). Both examples highlight the importance of nurturing internal strengths.

2.2.1 Strengthening and diversifying productive capacities

Building resilience in SIDS economies is fundamentally dependent on strengthening and diversifying productive capacities. Recent policy contributions highlight de-risking core sectors from external shocks and climate impacts on the one hand, and, on the other, promoting structural transformation into green, high-value, knowledge-intensive industries. The goal is to move beyond primary commodity reliance towards a robust, flexible economic base.

Significant investment has been made in climate-proofing infrastructure through initiatives supported by multilateral development banks. These focus on resilient transport, water and energy systems. The strategic push towards achieving 100% renewable energy (as committed by numerous SIDS) is crucial here, as it restructures productive capacity around green technologies, directly mitigating the vulnerability associated with high import dependence on volatile fossil fuels. Furthermore, the promotion of high-value, low-footprint services – such as financial services, ICT and business process outsourcing – is actively supported as a model for diversification (e.g., the success seen in Mauritius and the emerging focus in Jamaica and Fiji).

However, the scale and speed of this necessary transformation are severely limited by compounding institutional failures, data deficits and a chronic lack of adequate financing. This creates an inherent trade-off between the high aspirations of diversification and the ground-level capacity to execute it.

First, transitioning to these high-value sectors requires a significant, sustained investment in human capital, advanced digital infrastructure and regulatory reform. The limited institutional capacities of many SIDS are often overwhelmed by the high transaction costs and administrative complexity required to manage these projects, diverting scarce technical expertise from other pressing governance needs.

The goal is to move beyond primary commodity reliance towards a robust, flexible economic base.

Second, the ability to target, measure and scale productive capacity initiatives is undermined by the same data deficit that restricts concessional financing. Without granular, subnational data on skills gaps, private sector output and value chain bottlenecks in remote communities, the policies designed to promote diversification (such as support for micro, small and medium enterprises) often fail to reach the populations most in need. This results in limited inclusive growth and slow economic restructuring.

The need for high-quality, comprehensive data to overcome these challenges is paramount. Policy analysis aimed at

productive transformation relies on specialised indices and data sources – for example, the PCI and regional metrics such as the Caribbean Digital Transformation Index – to assess dimensions like infrastructure, human capital and innovation (see Appendix 1). Consequently, while the political will and technological blueprints exist, lack of sufficient concessional funding and pervasive institutional capacity constraints mean that these productive transformation efforts are not keeping pace with the rapidly accelerating effects of climate change and global economic volatility.

2.2.2 Modernising trade and investment

Recent contributions to trade and investment in SIDS have focused on leveraging data, modernising policy frameworks and strengthening regional cooperation to address persistent vulnerabilities. For instance, the International Trade Centre (ITC, 2024) has developed a new Trade Tracker for SIDS,⁵ providing a user-friendly tool for policy-makers to analyse trade trends. To address the vulnerability of SIDS to external shocks, UNCTAD's SIDS strategy promotes a new development model to foster structural transformation and move up global value chains (UNCTAD, 2024), enabling SIDS to escape the 'low value-added trap' (Nurse, 2016).

However, advancement of this structural transformation is severely undermined by the twin-deficit challenge: high public debt combined with large climate-induced

productive capacity losses. This situation creates a critical trade-off where a current financial crisis consumes the resources needed to avert a future climate crisis.

This trade-off is fundamentally rooted in financial and data limitations. The reliance on GNI per capita often misclassifies SIDS as high-income, excluding them from the concessional finance needed for trade capacity-building and climate adaptation. The debt pressures that result from this limited access continue to divert public resources away from crucial investments in trade competitiveness, digitalisation and public services, which severely undermines the SIDS economies.

2.2.3 Shifting to sustainable tourism models

As the impacts of overtourism become evident, many SIDS are actively pursuing a transition towards more sustainable models. Recent case studies highlight the need for inclusive, collaborative planning. However, this transition is hampered by significant governance and institutional gaps, creating a persistent trade-off in policy integration.

Many Pacific nations fail to formally link climate change policy and tourism policy (Becken and Loehr, 2025). Furthermore, where connections are made, the emphasis is heavily skewed towards adaptation (protecting coastal assets), with far less attention given to the tourism sector's crucial role in emissions mitigation (reducing the carbon footprint of the tourism model itself). This tension between protecting the existing,

5 See <https://trade-tracker.org/>

high-volume industry and fundamentally changing its core, high-carbon business model limits the speed of transition.

Critically, the inability to scale sustainable tourism is constrained by the data deficit and a generalised reluctance to implement fiscal measures (such as cruise levies) that could internalise the sector's environmental costs. While there are no one-size-fits-all solutions, the lack of granular, subnational data prevents targeted investment, while the hesitancy to tax tourism arrivals for fear of losing competitiveness limits the domestic revenue available for essential environmental and infrastructure projects. [Liu and Howes](#)

(2024) highlight the unevenness of post-pandemic recovery, noting that Palau's decline was due to the slow return of Asian tourists, while Vanuatu's growth was driven by lower-revenue cruise tourists.

Analysis like this highlights the critical importance of place-based data and the fiscal courage to capture value from specific tourism segments. Without data and revenue-generating tax policies, SIDS risk assuming similar contexts across different islands. This leads to misdirected investment and ineffective policy that fails to account for the true environmental impact of mass tourism.

Cruise ship, the Bahamas.
Photo: Sahil Singh/Pexels.



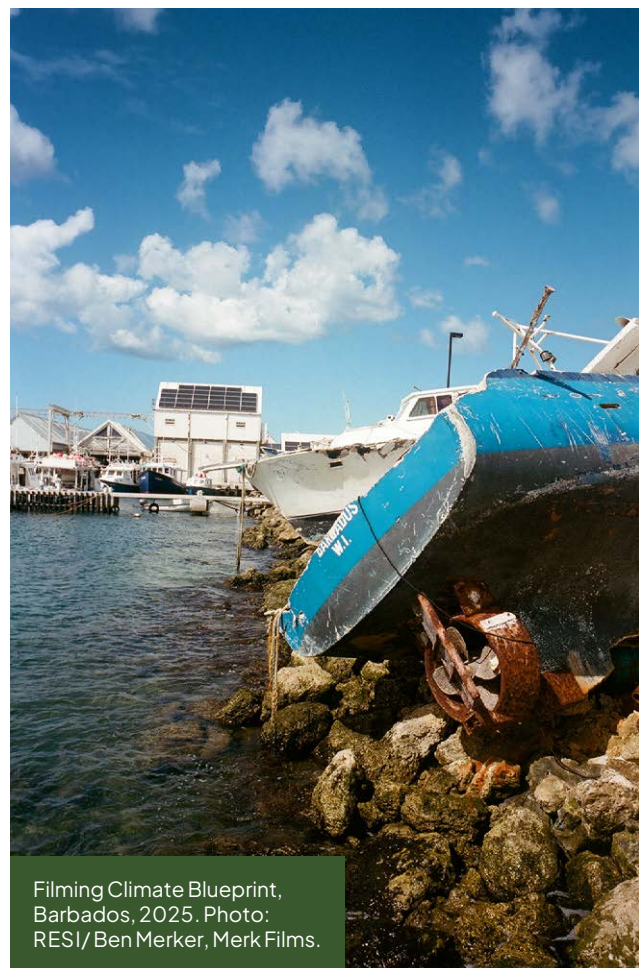
2.2.4 Transitioning towards sustainable ocean-based economies

Governance and stakeholder engagement are vital but often contradictory themes for the development of sustainable ocean-based economies. For example, how can large-scale ocean energy projects consider place identity and attachment when selecting sites, balancing an inherent conflict between industrial development and community values (Cavallo et al., 2023).

The 2022 World Bank guidance note *Blue economy data and tools* provides a comprehensive overview of resources for marine spatial planning (Lee and Castaño-Isaza, 2022). However, the effective application of these sophisticated planning tools is impeded by substantive data gaps and institutional failures in many developing countries. Challenges include the length and granularity of environmental data records and the failure to formally document traditional or Indigenous knowledge (Foley, 2021). This institutional disconnect between traditional knowledge and ‘traditional’ science remains a fundamental barrier to evidence-based management and investment, especially as advanced digital capacity is a prerequisite for high-value blue economy diversification (e.g., smart fisheries and marine biotechnology).

But a deeper structural tension exists – the debate over the ultimate purpose of the blue economy. Without a clear definition

that prioritises social and environmental goals, there is a risk that development focuses narrowly on economic growth at the expense of environmental sustainability and social equity (UN DESA, 2024). The data-limited environment exacerbates this risk, manifesting as a lack of integrated marine spatial planning (MSP) necessary to prevent conflicts between sectors and ensure equitable benefit-sharing. This is particularly true for small-scale artisanal fisheries whose livelihoods are often marginalised by large-scale projects.



Box 2.1 The Seychelles: innovative finance to boost the blue economy

The launch of the world's first sovereign blue bond by the Seychelles shows how innovative finance can simultaneously address multiple development challenges for SIDS. It provides a blueprint for leveraging institutional frameworks and multistakeholder collaboration to unlock natural capital, attract targeted investment and build cross-economy resilience.

At its core, the blue bond strengthens productive capacities by channelling US\$15 million into sustainable fisheries and marine conservation. This mechanism leverages SIDS' unique assets, such as vast EEZs and rich marine biodiversity, to foster economic diversification and strengthen production linkages away from often vulnerable sectors.

The bond balances economic activity with environmental preservation. It helps mitigate environmental challenges for sectors like fisheries, such as overfishing and pollution, thereby reconciling economic growth with the health of the marine ecosystem.

The initiative also addresses the persistent challenge of limited access to concessional finance and FDI. Unlike more volatile forms of FDI, the blue bond provides stable, purpose-driven capital directly tied to national sustainable development goals. This enhances fiscal resilience and reduces reliance on debt-inducing traditional external finance.

Finally, the initiative has strong ties to resilient and sustainable tourism. The marine conservation efforts funded by the blue bond preserve the natural assets – such as coral reefs and biodiversity – that underpin SIDS' tourism economies. This protection ensures the long-term viability of eco-tourism and niche tourism, which are less susceptible to overtourism, underscoring the necessity of integrated policy approaches.

The success of the original deal depended on a US\$5 million World Bank partial credit guarantee and a US\$5 million concessional loan from the Global Environment Facility (GEF). This made it a blended finance solution heavily de-risked by multilaterals, not a purely commercial issuance. But the Blue Investment Fund (BIF) suffered from slow uptake because its design – including a 4% interest rate, bureaucratic processes and capital reserve requirements – was largely inaccessible to the small-scale fishers and local enterprises it was intended to empower.

Can the Seychelles' blue bond be replicated?

While the macro-level policy is a triumph for the Seychelles, replication across SIDS remains limited by the need for robust institutional capacity, high-level financial expertise and a stable credit profile. These challenges sit alongside high fixed transaction costs and the political will needed to enact stringent conservation measures.

Box 2.2 Mauritius: strengthening productive capacities through digital transformation and diversification

The transition by Mauritius from a sugar-based economy to a diversified, upper-middle-income nation shows how SIDS can build resilience and overcome geographic isolation through technology and strategic partnerships. This approach enabled the economy to rebound from a 14.6% contraction in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic to an 8.7% rise in real GDP in 2022, despite subsequent moderation ([World Bank, 2025](#)).

The country's success is rooted in deliberate strategies to enhance its productive capacity through sustained investment in digital infrastructure and human capital. By developing its ICT sector, business process outsourcing and financial services, Mauritius shifted from reliance on a single commodity to a portfolio of high-value services. This has bolstered the country's resilience to external shocks and fostered high-skilled employment, enabling Mauritius to move up the global value chain.

The transformation was facilitated by effective public-private partnerships, creating a conducive environment for FDI. Also, Mauritius has strategically recognised its vast marine environment (EEZ of 2.3 million km²) as a new frontier, prioritising the sustainable blue economy. It established a dedicated ministry, and it is leveraging technological expertise (e.g., satellite data for maritime security and combating illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing) and investing in new frontiers like marine biotechnology. This model shows that advanced digital capacity is a prerequisite for high-value blue economy diversification, so SIDS can move beyond simple tourism and traditional fisheries towards knowledge-intensive ocean sectors.

Despite its overall success, however, Mauritius faces significant structural challenges. Internally, sustainability is threatened by high public debt and fiscal pressure from an ageing society. And labour market constraints persist, including a skills mismatch. Moreover, efforts to boost the blue economy have drawn criticism concerning governance and inclusion, with policy around MSP risking 'ocean grabbing' by favouring large-scale private investors over traditional small-scale fishers.

Can Mauritius' approach to productive capacity be replicated?

Most SIDS lack the sustained political stability, institutional capacity and multidecade strategic commitment of Mauritius so replication is complex. Financial and human resource constraints also make it prohibitive to build high-quality digital infrastructure. While Mauritius boasts near-universal mobile broadband, many SIDS struggle with connectivity affordability and a digital skills gap. Crucially, the sheer scale of diversification across textiles, tourism, finance and ICT – which allows Mauritius to absorb shocks effectively – is difficult for smaller SIDS with more limited resource endowments to match.

Box 2.3 Barbados: integrated resilience through financial innovation for sustainable tourism and the blue economy

Barbados has strategically embraced the blue economy as a core driver for resilient and sustainable economic growth. It has positioned itself as a global leader in innovative climate finance, including through the Bridgetown Initiative ([Government of Barbados, 2022](#)). This comprehensive approach balances economic activity with environmental preservation by strengthening its primary economic engine – tourism – while actively diversifying into new, high-value ocean-based sectors.

Instead of relying on mass tourism, Barbados is cultivating sustainable, high-value niche segments like eco-tourism and wellness retreats, where long-term viability is directly linked to the preservation of its natural marine assets (e.g., coral reefs). This strategy is reinforced by government action, including a nationwide ban on single-use plastics.

Barbados is also aggressively pursuing energy independence by exploring ocean energy technologies. This includes offshore wind, to help achieve its target of 100% renewable energy by 2030, thus reducing its critical dependence on imported fossil fuels.

The country has diversified by investing in marine biotechnology, such as researching the use of problematic sargassum seaweed to create new, valuable products.

Barbados' resilience strategy is complemented by its use of innovative finance instruments, including a recent debt-for-nature swap, to unlock dedicated funding for marine conservation. The transaction, which included the issuance of a blue bond, was completed in 2022.

The government successfully repurchased approximately US\$150 million of high-interest sovereign debt (average cost of around 7.2%) and replaced it with a new, lower-cost Blue Loan (all-in cost roughly 4.9%). This lower-cost debt was secured by credit guarantees from the Inter-American Development Bank and the Nature Conservancy. The operation will enable fiscal savings of about US\$50 million over 15 years to be channelled into a dedicated Barbados Environmental Sustainability Fund. In exchange, the country committed to protecting and effectively managing up to 30% of its ocean territory, a significant increase from near-zero protection. Crucially, the Blue Loan includes a disaster clause allowing for the deferral of principal payments for up to two years following a major climate event or pandemic, providing essential fiscal space during crises.

Building on this success, in 2024, Barbados completed a subsequent debt-for-climate-resilience operation, refinancing US\$300 million in domestic debt to generate an estimated US\$125 million in savings for investments in climate-resilient water and sewage infrastructure.

The Barbados model faces inherent challenges and limitations though. Internally, SIDS remain acutely vulnerable to escalating climate change impacts, including sea-level rise and more intense hurricanes. These directly threaten coastal assets and the tourism economy. Effective implementation requires substantial and sustained investment in local technical capacity and research for complex activities like MSP, which can strain limited national resources. Furthermore, the successful execution of a holistic blue economy strategy demands strong, ongoing coordination across government agencies and with local communities.

Can Barbados' approach to the blue economy be replicated?

Significant limitations exist for other SIDS seeking to replicate the model applied by Barbados. The suitability of the blue bond operation depends on each country's external debt profile and the availability of development partner support. Moreover, structuring these sophisticated financial deals requires a high level of financial, legal and political expertise that is often expensive and a major constraint in smaller nations.



Parliament building in Bridgetown, Barbados. Photo: David Broad/Wikimedia Commons.

2.3 Evidence and knowledge gaps

The advancement of resilient economies in SIDS is currently constrained by large knowledge gaps and pervasive data deficits across key sectors. This directly hinders effective policy-making, strategic investment and the accurate measurement of the true value and health of SIDS' resources. These knowledge and data deficits must be addressed to successfully implement the ABAS and to foster resilient, diversified SIDS economies.

2.3.1 Data and metrics gaps

The data challenges faced by SIDS are deeply rooted and explicitly recognised in the ABAS. The scarcity of detailed, high-quality data – particularly from outer islands, remote communities and informal sectors – directly hampers tailored policy-making.

Advanced statistical systems need to be built that effectively merge traditional statistics with geospatial and Indigenous knowledge using digital platforms. These systems require strengthened data governance, robust capacity-building, and coordinated funding and management from governments, regional bodies and international partners.

Research must play a significant role by assessing gaps and facilitating the effective integration of SIDS' local and Indigenous knowledge with 'traditional' science, especially through participatory dialogues. Successful initiatives, such as the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP, 2024) geospatial data workshops, have shown how tailored training and technology transfer can improve data quality. UNCTAD

(2025a) has also launched an initiative to improve the measurement of productive capacities in SIDS. This is building statistical capacity in collaboration with international custodian agencies, but the initiative remains concentrated in a handful of Caribbean pilot countries for the time being.

Ultimately, fostering inclusive local data ecosystems, supported by multistakeholder collaboration, is essential to enable precise vulnerability assessments and to drive more effective investment and resource allocation in SIDS (UNDP, 2024). The new Global Data Hub being set up under the SIDS Centre of Excellence will help foster these kinds of data ecosystems.

2.3.2 Financing and investment gaps

Significant knowledge gaps also persist regarding the flow of stable, long-term FDI into SIDS. Research is needed to overcome investor perceptions that SIDS are 'too risky' due to a lack of robust, verifiable data (Habib and Parris, 2025). This information deficit prevents the effective marketing of high-potential investment opportunities and the accurate assessment of risk-adjusted returns, thereby hindering the attraction of quality capital that supports national development goals.

The continued reliance on GNI per capita to determine eligibility for concessional finance classifies many SIDS as middle- or high-income. This leaves SIDS under-resourced (Habib and Parris, 2025) because it excludes them from vital concessional funding despite their high climate adaptation costs (UNCTAD, 2021) and pronounced economic vulnerabilities (Briguglio and Moncada, 2022). Furthermore, the application of innovative

financing mechanisms, such as blue/green bonds, remains limited to date (Mohan, 2023). Despite their potential, there is poor understanding of such mechanisms among many SIDS (UNEP, 2025). More research and well-designed pilot projects are needed to maximise the potential of these new and sophisticated mechanisms, particularly for emerging sectors like the blue economy.

2.3.3 Technology, innovation and R&D gaps

SIDS have insufficient research or data on technology adoption, R&D spending and innovation outcomes to benchmark their performance and effectively scale successful initiatives beyond traditionally dominant sectors like tourism and fisheries. It also means SIDS often lack the tailored insights needed to transition to high-value, knowledge-based economies.

This challenge is particularly acute in the marine domain. There is a significant lack of capacity to undertake deep- and open-ocean scientific research and to access the necessary technology for long-term marine management and surveillance. This limits SIDS' ability to fully understand and protect their vast EEZs, which are crucial for the blue economy. The digital and R&D gap severely constrains the future of the blue economy because advanced digital tools are a prerequisite for progress. This includes for marine biotechnology (enabling rapid, high-throughput analysis of marine genetic resources); smart fisheries (using artificial intelligence (AI) and sensors for precise, sustainable stock management); and blue

carbon finance (implementing the complex measurement, reporting and verification (MRV) systems required to monetise blue carbon assets).

Establishing innovation observatories and fostering targeted technology transfer partnerships would fill these gaps. Such strategies would empower SIDS to bypass traditional development barriers and accelerate their technological integration.

2.3.4 Governance and institutional gaps

There are significant knowledge gaps regarding the most effective governance innovations for building resilient economies in SIDS. Few rigorous assessments have been undertaken of the specific governance models that work best or how informal institutions and diaspora networks contribute to national resilience. Without a common understanding or a clear definition of what a sustainable ocean-based economy truly entails, there is a risk that development will prioritise short-term economic growth at the expense of crucial environmental sustainability and social equity goals (UN DESA, 2024).

A key challenge is the lack of integrated MSP. Integrated MSP is necessary to prevent conflicts between different ocean-based sectors (e.g., tourism, shipping and energy development) and to ensure equitable benefit-sharing. This is particularly important for small-scale artisanal fisheries, whose livelihoods are often overlooked in large-scale projects.

Additionally, global and regional knowledge platforms need to be created that focus on governance innovation and social capital. These would facilitate peer learning and the diffusion of evidence-based policy solutions across SIDS.

2.3.5 Value chain and linkage gaps

Mapping of production linkages and value chains remains limited, especially beyond the established sectors of tourism and fisheries. Without detailed analysis of these linkages, SIDS are missing crucial opportunities for economic diversification and deeper integration into regional and global markets.

In the tourism sector there is a persistent gap in the analysis of how to ensure that benefits are effectively retained locally and how to foster genuine, equitable partnerships with local communities (UNCTAD, 2021; Pantin, 1999). This prevents the formulation of policies that maximise the spillover effects of tourism into local agriculture, craft and services.

SIDS are missing crucial opportunities for economic diversification and deeper integration into regional and global markets.

To address these limitations, focused research and technical support are needed to identify key bottlenecks and to pilot innovative public-private partnerships. This is particularly necessary in high-potential emerging sectors like the blue economy and the creative industries.

2.4 Looking ahead

The future for SIDS is shaped by a confluence of demographic, technological and environmental shifts, ranging from rising climate risks to increasing digital trade and new forms of innovative finance. Countries will need to strategically navigate these trends to successfully build long-term resilience and foster sustainable growth.

Historically, SIDS have exploited niches in the global economy, especially in the financial services sector (Corbett, 2023). The focus on niches can and should continue. But new niches will need to be cultivated for SIDS to prosper in the emerging international order. The literature provides clues about such opportunities.

Filming ClimateBlueprint, Barbados, 2025.
Photo: RESI/BenMerker, Merk Films.



2.4.1 Greenleapfrogging

To sustainably manage public debt and simultaneously increase investment and productive capacities, SIDS need to move fast as opportunities arise. One such opportunity is in ‘green leapfrogging’ from heavy fossil fuel dependence towards achieving 100% renewable energy by 2030 (as committed by many SIDS). This transition is vital for restructuring productive capacities around green technologies and mitigating the economic vulnerability associated with high import dependence.

This focus on knowledge-intensive sectors is crucial for moving up the global value chain. However, it will require long-term dedicated investment from both public and private sectors.

Furthermore, the focus among SIDS is decisively shifting towards high-value, low-footprint industries. SIDS like Mauritius have already set a successful model by diversifying into financial and ICT-enabled services, with others like Jamaica and Fiji following suit. This focus on knowledge-intensive sectors is crucial for moving up the global value chain. However, it will require long-term dedicated investment from both public and private sectors.

2.4.2 Trade, investment and digital diversification

Future trends in trade and investment will be dominated by efforts to reduce the extreme vulnerability of SIDS’ highly open economies, which often exhibit trade-to-GDP ratios exceeding 100%.

Reliance on imported food and dependence on external markets make SIDS exceptionally susceptible to global shocks. A crucial response here is to embrace digital trade and e-commerce as a structural tool to overcome geographic remoteness and market fragmentation.

For SIDS, digitalisation is effectively a leapfrog strategy allowing micro, small and medium enterprises to directly access global consumers. This bypasses high logistical costs and helps SIDS move beyond the ‘low value-added trap’ traditionally associated with primary commodity exports. The focus for policy-makers, exemplified by initiatives like Trinidad and Tobago’s National E-Commerce Strategy, is on creating the necessary legal and regulatory frameworks (e.g., e-signatures, data protection) and strengthening regional cooperation to harmonise rules. This harmonisation is essential for making digital trade a truly viable engine of inclusive growth and diversification.

2.4.3 High-value niche tourism

The tourism sector, which forms the economic backbone of many SIDS, must transition to a model that manages the inherent paradox of climate risk (the threat to coastal assets) and carbon contribution (from international transport). Countries will need to move decisively away from high-volume, low-yield operations (such as traditional mass cruise tourism) towards sustainable, high-value, low-density niches.

Tourism models that focus on regenerating the natural capital assets on which SIDS depend for tourism are already being

developed. These revenue-raising models levy businesses and consumers that utilise (and damage) natural assets, with revenues going back into protecting and improving those natural capital assets. One example is Palau's successful Green Fee.

The rapid rise of digital nomad visa schemes across the Caribbean and Pacific signals another strategic shift to attract long-term, high-spending visitors whose economic contribution is less extractive and whose presence requires less physical infrastructure stress than transient tourists. To ensure this model is equitable and sustainable, there is growing emphasis on community-based tourism and authentic eco-tourism. While this trend helps to mitigate over-tourism and ensures greater local retention of benefits, it does require significant investment in high-speed internet connectivity and modernised transport links to meet the expectations of this new visitor class. This demands that policy-makers integrate their tourism strategy with national infrastructure planning.

2.4.4 Unlocking ocean capital

The blue economy is transitioning from a conceptual priority to a practical policy imperative. Yet this transition is unfolding within a fragmented and often lawless global ocean governance framework.

Lack of enforcement of the 2023 BBNJ Agreement remains a key challenge, leaving vast areas beyond national jurisdiction vulnerable to unregulated exploitation. And this governance vacuum is mirrored by a critical data deficit. Currently, it is impossible to produce official international statistics for EEZs, leaving many SIDS unable to fully quantify or protect their maritime assets. The

industry-led push into deep-sea mining exists in a regulatory vacuum too, threatening long-term socioecological systems for short-term mineral gain.

The blue economy is transitioning from a conceptual priority to a practical policy imperative.

Within this complex landscape, there are niche opportunities for SIDS in the development of blue carbon finance mechanisms to unlock capital for both climate mitigation and adaptation. Blue carbon involves the carbon sequestration stored in coastal ecosystems like mangroves and seagrass meadows. However, for these mechanisms to move beyond niche pilot projects, they need to be supported by international legal architecture that closes existing enforcement loopholes and provides SIDS with statistical and diplomatic tools to assert true sovereignty over their waters.

The Bahamas has begun establishing a regulatory environment with its Carbon Markets Initiatives Bill, aiming to monetise these natural assets. However, the viability of blue carbon credits is constrained by high upfront MRV costs and reliance on a volatile voluntary carbon market. This highlights the critical need for digital transformation and R&D, because high-quality and continuous MRV relies entirely on satellite data, advanced sensors and digital platforms.

Furthermore, while coral reefs and kelp forests are crucial ecosystems for adaptation, fisheries and coastal protection, they are not widely included in blue carbon mitigation methodologies currently. The future

success of this sector hinges on two things: 1) expanding the scope of accredited blue carbon assets, and 2) building the capacity of SIDS to manage complex financial and governance requirements, leveraging innovative tools like those demonstrated by Belize's Blue Carbon Working Group.

SIDS policy-makers and their international partners should deepen cross-sectoral integration across government ministries and down to local communities. This requires a holistic approach, as future resilience cannot rely on siloed, sector-specific strategies. And it requires recognition that financial, human and natural assets are inextricably linked.

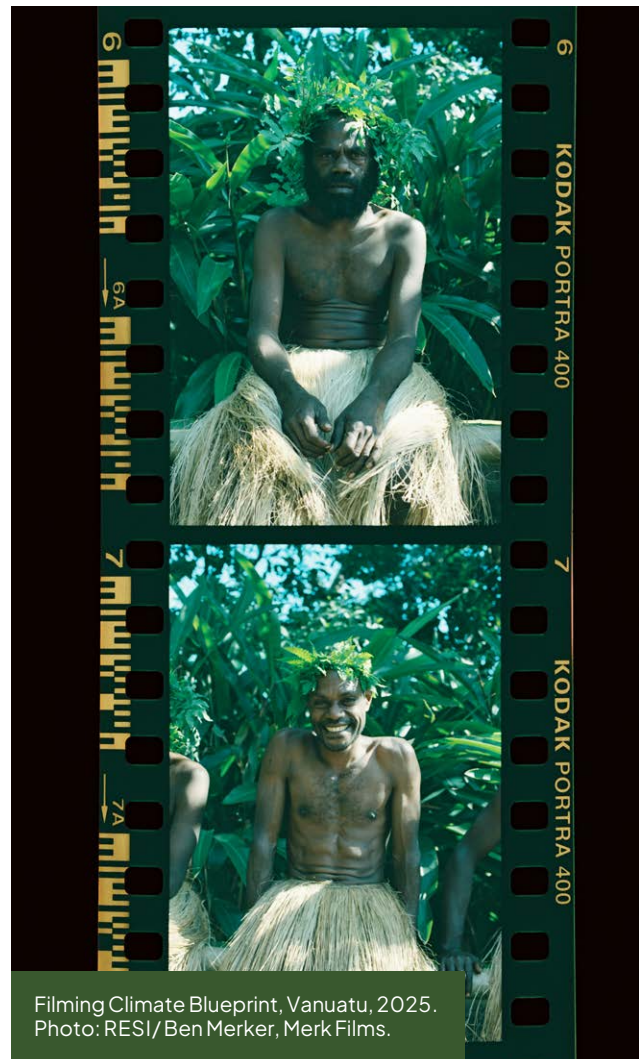
The core challenge remains one of funding. Reliance on an outdated and restricted GNI-based classification system severely curtails SIDS' access to concessional finance, penalising development progress. The global community must transition to vulnerability-adjusted financing frameworks to support SIDS undertaking structural transformations.

For SIDS, solidifying this integrated and sustainable future means taking a long-term outlook, focused on three strategic areas:

1. digital leadership, leveraging small-scale for high-value digital services and blue technology
2. climate-smart structural transformation, integrating climate action into every major economic policy decision to drive new sustainable growth

3. harnessing Indigenous knowledge, formally bridging the gap between scientific planning tools and traditional knowledge systems for locally owned and effective resource management.

Ultimately, by leveraging technology and investing strategically in their unique natural and human capital, SIDS can overcome traditional constraints and secure a more prosperous future.



Filming Climate Blueprint, Vanuatu, 2025.
Photo: RESI/Ben Merker, Merk Films.

3. SAFER, HEALTHIER AND MORE EQUITABLE SOCIETIES: TAKING GENDER AND CARE SERIOUSLY

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Summary

Ensuring genuinely safe, healthy and equitable societies in Small Island Developing States (SIDS) requires valuing and affirming gender equality and undertaking transformative action to redress deep and pervasive inequalities.

Many debates around SIDS start from a gender-neutral and macrostructural perspective. They focus on economic vulnerability, environmental pressures and the impacts of climate change and extreme weather events.

What is often missing is a gender-sensitive and bottom-up perspective. That is, prioritising the microsocial context that shapes and is often dramatically reshaped by these large-scale events, and the central and interconnected role of gender and intersectional inequality within this context.

Insufficient attention is paid to how intersectional inequalities – across gender, race, ethnicity, class, age, disability,

sexuality and migration status – influence the nature of crises and responses to them, as well as their effects on the social fabric. These inequalities shape which groups are disproportionately affected, where funds and resources are targeted, and who is included or excluded by relevant policy.

This chapter explores these themes through a framework that centres gender, care and social reproduction, and intersectional patterns of inequality within the pressures of the global political economy. These pillars are key to understanding the social context in SIDS and to achieving safer, healthier and more equitable societies.





3.1 Key debates

The recent Category 4 and 5 cyclones in Vanuatu (2023), Hurricane Beryl in the Eastern Caribbean (2024) and Hurricane Melissa in Jamaica (2025) show how development achievements in SIDS can be instantly and disproportionately set back by exogenous shocks, impoverishing families and communities.

A student-led initiative ignited in Vanuatu in 2023 culminated in an historic Advisory Opinion from the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on the human rights obligations of industrialised states in relation to climate change. This includes the right to life, health, an adequate standard of living, privacy, family, and home; the rights of women, children and Indigenous peoples; and the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment. The ICJ outcome underscores the intimate connection between macro-structural forces – climate change plus

security, military, extractive threats and more – and the gendered and social realities of life in SIDS.

3.1.1 The centrality of gender, care and social reproduction

Through its theme on ‘safe, healthy and prosperous societies’, the Antigua and Barbuda Agenda for SIDS (ABAS) articulates an urgent call to accelerate efforts in SIDS to eliminate systems of inequality ([UN-OHRLLS, 2024](#)).

Protracted sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), asymmetries of care, climate crises and food insecurity are all manifestations of enduring inequalities rooted in colonialism and extractivism. While the ABAS focuses on ‘prosperous societies’, this chapter of *The state of SIDS report 2026: defending the special case (SSR2026)* shifts the analytical lens towards ‘more equitable’ and ‘flourishing’ societies.

This is because a focus on prosperity, wealth and economic growth often masks systematic inequalities experienced by women and other marginalised groups, while also undervaluing and failing to recognise the essential care and social reproductive work primarily undertaken by women. By this we mean the unpaid or underpaid labour that produces and nurtures people, families and communities – labour that is vital for societies to flourish but that imposes a ‘triple burden’ on women who juggle paid work, caring responsibilities and domestic labour, and unpaid community management work ([Moser, 1993](#)).

Analyses of development policy in SIDS often start from a top-down, gender-neutral, macrostructural perspective, rather than a bottom-up, gender-sensitive, microsocial one. Consequently, a gender-inspired framework is indispensable for illuminating social relations.

Although significant progress has been made in SIDS around educational attainment, childhood immunisation and women’s participation in the formal economy, challenges persist. Men are overrepresented in senior leadership across all sectors, including in national parliaments. Many communities, especially in rural areas or on outlying islands, struggle to access basic health and other services. And women dominate the informal economy and carry the triple burden of different work, while also facing heightened exposure to SGBV.

Inequality is an enduring feature of SIDS and it disproportionately impacts the

most vulnerable. It is perpetuated by multiple interlocking forces of power and social relations, and it severely undermines aspirations for safe, healthy and flourishing societies.

Gendered inequalities are a particular concern because they are damaging, widespread and manifest in diverse forms, including health, political and economic disparities. They also reproduce harmful social norms and practices – especially around sexuality and inclusion – and so undermine progress in other areas of inequality and prevent safe and healthy societies from flourishing.

This reflects a broader problem: analyses of development policy in SIDS often start from a top-down, gender-neutral, macrostructural perspective, rather than a bottom-up, gender-sensitive, microsocial one. Consequently, a gender-inspired framework is indispensable for illuminating social relations. This centres people, families, communities and the multiple intersecting dimensions of inequality that they navigate, rather than centring abstract economic processes.

The analytical framework used in this chapter views gender as ‘a key relation of power and difference’ ([DeShong 2024: 79](#)). It assesses research that foregrounds experiences of women, girls and gender-diverse individuals, who are negatively affected to a disproportionate degree because they belong to specific social or cultural groups. Men and boys are not excluded though – indeed, they are an intrinsic part of the power relations that mark enduring gender inequality, and they are also impacted by the negative effects of societal gender norms ([Kerrigan, 2019](#); [Baird, 2021](#)).

Box 3.1 What do we mean by ‘gender’ and ‘intersectionality’?

The concept of **gender** refers to behaviours, social relations and systems that influence the distribution of power and organise difference, based on practices and ideas that become associated with an individual’s ‘sexed’ body. This means that social systems are predicated on often-implicit expectations about how people should act, be treated and fit into society based on their perceived gendered characteristics. The games children play, the people who lead, the policies made, the distribution of public resources are all rooted in gendered power relations.

These, in turn, are mediated by **intersectional factors**, understood as intersecting axes of inequality and power (Crenshaw, 1991; Hill Collins, 2009). This means that characteristics or components of identity – sex or gender plus age, race, Indigenous status, ethnicity, class, disability, sexuality, migration status and even island status – shape how different people are perceived and where they stand in the social order. They shape what power, resources or capital a person holds, and what social outcomes they experience.

SIDS-focused research has variously addressed intersectional inequalities. This includes how women struggle to access political citizenship in Mauritius, given prevailing ethnic and communal representation (Ramtohul, 2015); how Caribbean anti-discrimination laws have not fully overcome prevailing race, gender and class inequalities (Antoine, 2018); how vulnerable groups in Maldivian atolls face unique risks from hazards and disasters (McNamara and Clissold, 2019); and how Trinidadian foodways are reproduced by longstanding intersections of gender, class and race (Thompson, 2021). Inequality, then, influences the exercise of citizenship in myriad ways (Campbell and Johnson-Myers, 2023).

Gender justice, health and inclusion are core enablers of ABAS outcomes on prosperity, resilience and social well-being. They also underpin other ABAS pillars like ‘resilient economies’ and ‘the means of implementation’, because they enable

individuals, communities and countries to counter the detrimental impacts of contemporary global political, economic and environmental crises (Wabnitz et al., 2021; Bleeker et al., 2021; Bailey et al., 2024).

Addressing these concerns is urgent. Yet references to gender equality in policy continue to be deployed as instrumentalised rhetoric, especially through a focus on market-based and environmental outcomes (Flavell, 2024). While ‘gender sensitive’ and ‘responsiveness’ programming rightly centre women’s roles and needs, they often fall short of addressing deeper underlying issues – such as racism, patriarchal dominance and relations of care – that perpetuate gender and other inequalities (Lawless et al., 2021; Johnston, 2023).

Gendered social, political, cultural and economic landscapes are not static – witness the influence and use of social media, the development of new information and

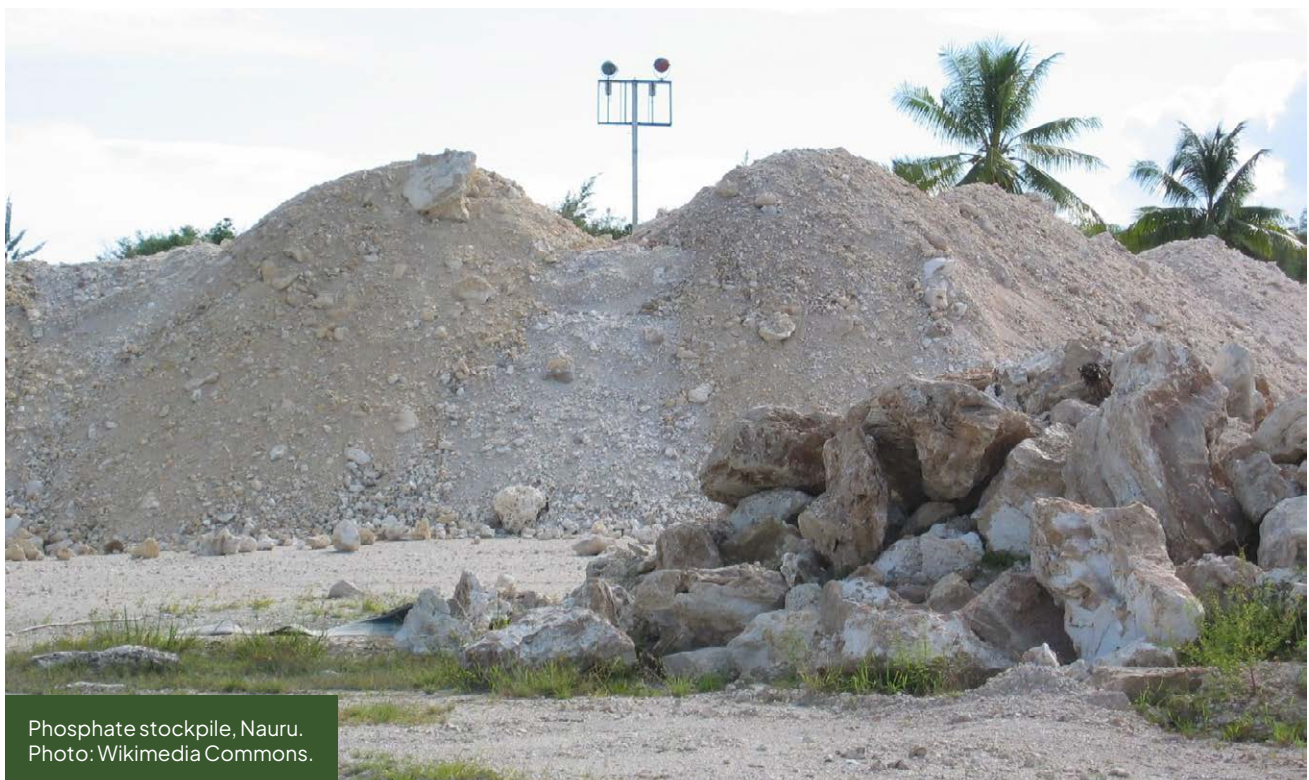
communication technologies like artificial intelligence, the revival of conservative theologies and the growing geopolitical interest in SIDS. Fortunately, analytical and theoretical tools used in SIDS research are also responding in agile and dynamic ways, not least in terms of the emergence of SIDS scholars who engage in sophisticated ways to challenge inequalities ([Asafo, 2020](#); [Burnett, 2025](#); [Kant et al., 2025](#); [Sobion, 2023](#); [Williams, 2017](#)).

3.1.2 Inequality in SIDS

For many SIDS, the earliest root causes of inequality lie in shared histories of colonial occupation, control and labour exploitation. This includes slavery, indentureship and natural resource exploitation. Mining and deforestation have caused environmental degradation, land loss and the creation of dispossessed low-wage workers, which include women and young people.

For instance, some Pacific SIDS were subjected to atomic and nuclear weapons tests by imperial powers and the effects of being part of the ‘sacrifice zones’ continue today ([Maclellan, 2024](#); [Jackson, 2025](#)). Islands once used by occupying colonial powers to detonate dangerous nuclear bombs in the Marshall Islands and the Territory of Maohi Nui/French Polynesia remain uninhabitable, while people across these islands are still afflicted by the insidious intergenerational health effects of radiation, including cancers ([Maurer, 2024](#)). Meanwhile, relentless mining of phosphate turned 90% of central Nauru and most of Ocean Island into wastelands ([Nazzal, 2005](#); [Teaiwa, 2015](#)).

For many SIDS, the earliest root causes of inequality lie in shared histories of colonial occupation, control and labour exploitation.



Phosphate stockpile, Nauru.
Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

In the Indian Ocean, archaeological research has revealed how colonial disruption of island ecologies through the establishment of plantations and resource extraction reshaped the natural environment. This has undermined ecosystem resilience, erased local knowledge and shaped contemporary social inequality (Douglass and Cooper, 2020).

In Cabo Verde, the ‘maladministration of the land’ by colonisers drove the country towards an ‘ecological disaster’ (Lopes, 2023). And in the Caribbean, too, colonial institutions and plantation logics deleteriously shaped physical, environmental and social structures that influence present-day adaptive capacity (Robinson et al., 2023).

Today, pronounced inequality inhibits access to resources like education, health and nutrition, housing, work, social security and safety. These resources tend to be maldistributed in many SIDS, reinforcing poverty and exclusion for certain groups, especially the most vulnerable (Panwar et al., 2024). Prevailing patterns of inequality also determine who bears the brunt – and unequal costs – of large-scale disasters like hurricanes or volcanic eruptions, as well as more insidious challenges like violence, discrimination and access to justice (Bleeker et al, 2021; Tandrayen-Ragoobur et al., 2024; Takahashi, 2025).

The consequences of inequality are severe and therefore need to be addressed urgently. They affect individuals, communities, social structures, discourses, imaginations and practices. They also affect responses to unfolding environmental and economic crises, like climate change, whose causes originate elsewhere. Despite decades of development interventions to

address inequality, however – especially gender equality and the empowerment of women – there is still a failure to understand the significance of the labour and care that go into constantly negotiated and harmful gendered social, cultural, economic and political relations (Alemany et al., 2019).

3.1.3 Global political economy pressures

Inequality stemming from powerful colonial legacies are exacerbated by today’s global economic pressures and the devastating consequences of climate change.

In more recent history, powerful international financial institutions and their regional counterparts compelled developing states everywhere to adopt prescribed neoliberal policies as loan conditions (Slatter, 2019). Over time, a range of policies implemented by SIDS and other developing states saw revenue-earning and social-provisioning capacities reduced while the private sector, global corporations and wealthy individuals flourished. Gendered financial inclusion programmes, underpinned by global corporate interests, then unwittingly drew the ‘unbanked poor’ into global financial flows that thrived on debt and thus entrenched inequalities (Eves and Titus, 2017).

Some benefited from these shifts. Many SIDS exploited new services industries in liberalised markets to generate growth (Bishop et al., 2025). But that growth was often exceptionally volatile – with huge swings in foreign exchange earnings and tax revenues – and it strained the social fabric. In Mauritius, for example, the rise of Export Processing Zones in which garment manufacturing helped the country ascend



Woman preparing for market, Cabo Verde. Photo: Kristin Wilson/Unsplash.

global value chains also generated precarity and impoverishment among female workers, in particular (Ramtohul, 2008). Overall, three decades of neoliberal policies in SIDS have exacerbated inequality and poverty, making it even more difficult to address their social and economic challenges (Slatter, 2019).

Escalating global inequality over the same period was marked by the concentration of wealth in fewer hands. And the flipside of the super wealthy minority class has been phenomenal deterioration in poverty and inequality.⁶

Alongside climate change, inequality is today recognised as ‘one of the most urgent concerns’ and ‘a major threat to the global community’.⁷ The two are inextricably linked in

SIDS: frequent disasters generate cumulative impacts that trap people in cycles of poverty and mean that over 20 million SIDS citizens are either in poverty already or at risk of it (Panwar et al., 2024). Encouragingly though, methods of researching and understanding poverty have improved vastly with the use of a multi-dimensional approach (Chattier, 2016; Fisk and Crawford, 2017; Caperna and Papademetriou, 2020). This has the potential to improve understanding and ameliorate intersectional inequalities.

External economic pressures accentuate inequality in numerous ways. Trade and investment agreements have a direct effect on the production and consumption of sufficient nutritious food and the use of energy (Bunkley et al., 2023; Rezaei et al., 2026).

6 On 15 January 2024, Oxfam (2024) reported that ‘the world’s five richest men had more than doubled their fortunes from \$405 billion to \$869 billion since 2020 – at a rate of \$14 million per hour, while nearly five billion people had been made poorer’, and that poverty won’t be eradicated for another 229 years.

7 A G20 Committee of Independent Experts is proposing the establishment of an International Panel on Inequality. See G20 Extraordinary Committee of Independent Experts on Global Inequality (2025).

Flows of labour in and out of SIDS and flows of 'Compact migrants' in the northern Pacific (Smith and Castañeda, 2021) generate much needed remittances to send home, but social disruptions to families and communities are debilitating and untenable for sustainable futures. In the Caribbean, out-migration of skilled workers has weighed heavily on domestic labour markets and training systems. Consequently, there is a longstanding debate on 'brain drain' versus 'brain gain' and 'brain circulation' (Dawson, 2007).

Extractive industries – fishing, logging, oil extraction and, increasingly, deep-sea mining – pose significant challenges and often generate civil unease. Several Pacific and Caribbean SIDS have long experience with extractive industries, including bauxite, phosphate, copper and nickel mining, plus oil and gas. Now, the planned extraction of critical minerals from the deep seabed, which is promoted as a blue economy industry, risks destroying what is widely considered to be the last wilderness on the planet. Experimental deep-sea mining poses major risks to the already-destabilised climate system, to ocean health and to marine biodiversity. And ultimately, it poses major risks to the livelihoods, way of life and well-being of Pacific SIDS populations (where deep-sea mining is most advanced) and of SIDS populations generally (Kasanawaqa, 2024).

SIDS are divided over participating in this industry. Several Pacific SIDS have declared a moratorium on deep-sea mining and there are strong citizen campaigns against it. However, three islands are seriously invested in engaging in the industry with expectations of becoming wealthy. Two are sponsors of a mining company determined to commence mining tenements it holds in the area under

the jurisdiction of the International Seabed Authority; the third has licensed several mining companies to explore for critical minerals within its Exclusive Economic Zone (Slatter and Penjueli, 2025a). In Indian Ocean states, such as Mauritius and the Seychelles, 'Large Ocean State' and blue economy narratives that speak to an expansive 'geopolitical imaginary' also potentially conflict with the interests of disenfranchised coastal communities (Saddington, 2023; Wiehe et al., 2025).

Green energy arguments for the industry have been replaced by demand for critical minerals from the deep seabed by great powers, specifically for military use (Slatter and Penjueli, 2025b). For example, the United States announced in April 2025 an intention to unilaterally license mining companies outside of international law and governance, citing the need to create a domestic supply chain of critical minerals from the seabed to underpin industry and counter China's position. Washington moved to begin auctioning exploration and mining leases within its territorial waters, beginning with the seabed on the outer continental shelf of the Territory of American Samoa. This has faced strong opposition by the government and people of the territory.

In sum, there are stark differences in how global forces such as 'globalized financialization, technological revolutions, climate change, war and violence affect women and men'; '... these forces differentially shape lived experiences, sometimes conflicting with but more often reproducing gendered inequalities in work, incomes, resources and power' (Alemany et al., 2019: 470).

3.2 Recent trends and contributions

3.2.1 Building safer and just societies

The ABAS emphasises the need to promote peaceful, prosperous, inclusive and safe societies and communities. It frames human rights, fundamental freedoms and equal access to fair justice systems – along with good governance and the rule of law – as integral to this aim.

Gender norms and inequalities intersect with other challenges to the right to live free from harm. Therefore, it is important to eliminate all forms of discrimination and SGBV against women and girls, while at the same time addressing the structural inequalities and discriminatory and exclusionary processes that disproportionately affect all marginalised groups. These groups include women and girls; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual and other (LGBTQIA+) persons; those living with disabilities; youth; the elderly; and Indigenous peoples.

Sexual and gender-based violence

Globally, SGBV remains by far the most serious manifestation of gender inequality. Prevalence data are inconsistent and partial, but the available evidence points to higher than global average rates of SGBV in the Pacific and the Caribbean ([UN Women and CDB, 2020](#); [UNFPA Asia and the Pacific, 2023](#)). Evidence for the Atlantic, Indian Ocean and South China Sea (AIS) region is insufficient for comparison. Lifetime prevalence rates of intimate partner violence (IPV) against women range between 40% and 68% for Pacific SIDS ([Chand et al., 2024](#)), and between 38% and 55% for

Caribbean SIDS ([UN Women and CDB, 2020](#)). This compares with an estimated global IPV lifetime prevalence rate of 27% ([Sardinha et al., 2022](#)).

Evidence gaps in SIDS are even more acute in relation to the SGBV experiences of pregnant women and girls, women and girls living with disabilities, women and girls living with HIV, and sex workers ([Jones, 2021](#); [Lowe et al., 2025](#); [Macleod et al., 2024](#)). Since 2020, the impact of economic shocks, the COVID-19 pandemic, climate-related disasters, plus associated displacement and forced migration has increased the exposure of women, girls and children to SGBV while reducing their access to support and prevention services ([Guell et al., 2024](#)). Addressing SGBV in SIDS requires attention to how gender and sexuality operate in connection to race to produce violent relations that are embedded in histories of colonialism ([Mardorossian, 2010](#); [Haynes and DeShong, 2017](#); [DeShong, 2024](#)). SIDS research on violence must also include the complex socio-historical, political economy and geopolitical contexts that not only produce these harms, but that operate in actions to prevent and address SGBV.

A significant strand of qualitative research centres women's narratives of sexual and physical violence in heterosexual relations. It cites SGBV as repeated, intergenerational and grounded in harmful gendered assumptions that endorse men's proprietary attitudes towards women. It is more likely to occur when other conditions of inequality are present, as described variously in research in Guam ([Meno and Allen, 2021](#)); Grenada and Barbados ([Jones, 2021](#)); the Solomon Islands ([Zutu, 2024](#)); Samoa ([Lowe et al., 2025](#)); and

the Seychelles and Mauritius (Zungu et al., 2024). Studies in Samoa, Kiribati, Barbados and Grenada, for example, demonstrate that age, reduced levels of education, living with disability, living with HIV and pregnancy are all significantly associated with increased IPV (Spiteri-Staines et al., 2025; Lowe et al., 2025; Jones, 2021).

The experiences of LGBTQIA+ persons have begun to appear in studies of SGBV in SIDS too (Ravulo et al., 2024). One such study examines the ‘everydayness’ of violence against queer Guyanese women in same-sex unions. It shows how, in post-colonial SIDS such as Guyana, intersecting systems of gender, race, sexuality and religion embed IPV against queer women within broader relations with the state, society, communities and families (Kumar, 2022).

Tradition and culture are critical for understanding how gender relations embed patriarchal beliefs to produce violence. Research from the Solomon Islands and other Melanesian countries points to how both ‘patriarchal authority’ and the *Wantok* system – which focuses on group identity, belonging, reciprocity and caring for others – shape responses to SGBV (Watson et al., 2025). As such, the specific needs of women who maintain care economies are given less consideration in predominantly male-led public spaces.

Sorcery-related violence elsewhere in the Pacific is another particularly worrying form of violence (Gibbs, 2015). In St. Vincent and the Grenadines, the (now-defunct) practice of staging mock trials and hanging effigies was once a historical, community-based and extra-legal response to SGBV, inviting social shaming rather than due legal

process. In some instances, the notion of collective blame meant that girls were targeted as partly culpable for the sexual violence they experienced at the hands of family members (DeShong, 2025). These examples underscore the need for context-specific approaches for defining and addressing SGBV.

Policy-making and support services around SGBV have improved but deeply embedded cultural norms still undermine enforcement. At the same time, violence against women is becoming more prevalent and more severe (Underhill-Sem and Guttenbeil-Likiliki, 2025). While this conflicts with some historical narratives of gender egalitarianism and community-based sanctions for violence against women in many SIDS, the generational harm that comes from violence changes culture (Meno and Allen, 2021).

At the state level, responses to SGBV include the strengthening of legislation on domestic violence and sexual offences, draft legislation on technology-facilitated SGBV and the creation of national action plans. Women’s and feminist organisations have driven these reforms, yet implementation remains uneven and resourcing is inconsistent.

Policy-making and support services around SGBV have improved but deeply embedded cultural norms still undermine enforcement.

Although SIDS are signatories to many global and regional processes and agreements relevant to SGBV, effective action requires adequately funded and multisectoral strategies that include governments, non-

governmental organisations and community members. These strategies must tackle impunity, expand education and prevention programmes, and demonstrate high-level political commitment and action.

Climate change and disaster management

Increased exposure to climate change-related hazards is detrimental for health and well-being, social inequalities and sustainable development in SIDS (Allen et al., 2021). It has been described as a ‘risk multiplier’, intensifying existing health threats directly and indirectly due to complex interconnected issues (Savage et al., 2020; Gordon-Strachan et al., 2025).

Direct effects of climate change include ill-health and mortality stemming from extreme weather events, increased risk of heat-related illnesses and waterborne disease, water insecurity, declines in local food production and disruption to fisheries (Savage et al., 2020; Bowen et al., 2024; Gordon-Strachan et al., 2025). Many of these factors are also compounded by flows of short-term (imported) food aid in response to extreme weather events that can destabilise long-term food security (WHO, 2023).

Indirect effects compound risk factors related to food insecurity – namely, increased reliance on food imports, non-communicable diseases (NCDs), malnutrition, mental health issues and stress, disruptions to livelihoods, lifestyle changes, and disruption to and poor resilience of health care services (Savage et al., 2020; WHO, 2023; Rezaei et al., 2026).

Extreme weather events and climate change exacerbate inequalities, discrimination and processes of exclusion.

And, again, they disproportionately impact marginalised groups, such as women and girls, LGBTQIA+ communities, people living with disabilities and Indigenous populations (Bleeker et al., 2021).

For example, evidence from the Bahamas shows that, after Hurricane Dorian in 2019, women were displaced more than men, while LGBTQIA+ persons and Haitian women and girls faced greater discrimination and heightened risks of GBV. Shelters lacked gender-responsive planning and management, leading to all three groups avoiding them (Bleeker et al., 2021). In the Solomon Islands, people living with disabilities have been routinely excluded from and ignored in all phases of disaster management due to stigma, discrimination, hidden disabilities and limited understanding



Filming Climate Blueprint, Dominica, 2024. Photo: RESI/Eric Soucy.

of their needs ([King et al., 2019](#)). Unequal access to resources, poor infrastructure and inadequate housing have further heightened their vulnerability.

Greater awareness, attitudinal change and inclusive disaster management processes that prioritise participation, accessibility, non-discrimination and collaboration are needed to reduce vulnerability and improve outcomes ([King et al., 2019](#)).

Justice

Access to justice is maldistributed in SIDS: under-resourced police forces, over-burdened courts, limited legal aid and small communities of lawyers all constrain the ability of citizens to adequately defend themselves or pursue redress. These challenges are exacerbated by inequalities of gender, wealth, power and geography, especially in archipelagic states.

Persistent delays in dispensing criminal justice undermine public confidence and raise questions about due process. Limited policing capacity can lead to misreporting of crimes and further undermine legal cases. Prison conditions are frequently abysmal and unsanitary, with overcrowding and lengthy pre-trial detention the norm in many places, undermining human rights. Some SIDS retain capital punishment in law, mainly in the Caribbean, although most no longer carry out executions in practice.

Part of the problem with access to justice is that police forces and prison systems were rarely established to serve the public. In the Caribbean, they emerged from plantation slavery to maintain order in deeply racially stratified and unequal societies – and to

protect the plantocracy *from* the public. These cultures were carried over into independence, where they often became disciplinary tools of the state. Police forces have often experienced sustained antagonism with marginalised groups, while also gradually seeing their functions supplanted by private security firms operating with questionable legitimacy ([Bishop and Montoute, 2017](#); [Bishop and Kerrigan, 2023](#)).

Research remains limited, but available evidence shows that incarceration rates are disproportionately high in SIDS. Six countries in the Caribbean region, five in the Pacific region and one in the AIS region comprise nearly half of the top 25 countries globally according to incarceration rates ([World Prison Brief, 2026](#)). Incarcerated populations are predominantly Black and Brown males from impoverished and marginalised communities, who are routinely subjected to abusive and degrading conditions. They also tend to be the most disenfranchised people from the most traumatised urban margins where homicidal violence proliferates ([Baird et al., 2022 and 2023](#); [Kerrigan, 2018](#)). A notable exception is Belize Central Prison, where management by the Kolbe Foundation since 2002 has significantly improved conditions ([Baird, 2024](#)).

Male incarceration in SIDS reflects enduring colonial carceral structures and systematic underdevelopment. This has produced cycles of imprisonment and it perpetuates further cycles of brutality and community harm ([Kerrigan and Baird, 2025](#)). Potential reform pathways include expanded desistance programmes, non-custodial sentences and abolitionist approaches ([Kerrigan and Baird, 2025](#)).

3.2.2 Building healthier and inclusive societies

Building healthier societies and stronger, more inclusive health systems is central to the aims of the ABAS. Closely linked to this are the threats posed by communicable diseases and NCDs; the rising prevalence of mental health issues; and persistent inequalities and exclusions in the availability of and access to quality healthcare services, including sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR).

Also significant are the many gendered and intersectional inequalities that cut across experiences of exclusion, the burden of unpaid and poorly paid work (falling disproportionately on women), and the need to ensure the foundational conditions required for healthy and inclusive societies to thrive.

Sexual and reproductive health and rights

We are seeing a global decline in democracy, with an estimated 40% of the world's population now living under authoritarian rule and declines in the quality of democracy in democratic states (EIU, 2025).

This has fuelled a growing transnational anti-rights movement and, in particular, a backlash against SRHR and a rollback on reproductive rights (Harman, 2024). Reduced funding to the United Nations Population Fund and the World Health Organization is also eroding support for national-level SRHR and maternal health programmes and services.

Some countries register progress, but, overall, SRHR services are incomplete, inaccessible and compromised by barriers caused by social and cultural norms (Ahmed et al., 2025). In most SIDS, the right to decide on one's own sexual and reproductive health

is still limited to a small percentage of women in the reproductive age range (15–49 years). In Oceania, for instance, only 14% of women (one in seven) have the freedom to realise their sexual and reproductive rights.

The direct consequences of these arrangements are observed in the high number of pregnancies. These limit women's education and employment opportunities, and they heighten the risks of poor health for mothers and children (UN, 2024). For women, the right to bodily autonomy is fundamental to the realisation of their human rights.

With large youthful populations in SIDS, SRHR services for youth are vital. But they are lacking in number and type, and many services are missing. Culturally appropriate youth centres to share knowledge of SRHR have been found to be the most appropriate channel in general. The same goes for delivering services to youth facing frequent climate-related disasters (Murphy et al., 2023), for young people participating in labour mobility schemes (Kanan and Putt, 2023), and for young people living with disabilities (Stephenson, 2019). In the Pacific, low contraceptive prevalence continues, as does high adolescent fertility and unsafe abortion, and there is growing evidence of reproductive coercion (Dawson et al., 2021).

Maternal mortality is difficult to measure in SIDS, but some country estimates reveal huge differences (Mola and Kirby, 2013; Bourne et al., 2023; Abasse et al., 2021). Accurate assessments of maternal mortality are not easy to obtain because civil registration and vital statistics and health information systems are weak in most low-income SIDS. However, a scoping review and legislative analysis of abortion laws in

Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands and Samoa shows unsafe abortions to be a leading cause of maternal deaths (Cao et al., 2025). Accessing safe maternal healthcare is complex and the COVID-19 pandemic only heightened this. There has been progress, though, in women making earlier decisions to seek care, in receiving care and in gaining appropriate care. Delays in progress relate to women lacking the power to make decisions and to the design and functioning of the health system.

Governments and donors in Pacific and Caribbean SIDS, in particular, need to better understand the additional investment required to scale up sexual and reproductive health and maternal health services to improve access in their regions. No global investment cases have been conducted for these crucial health services in these SIDS, which often have small populations and affordability needs, but recent analysis suggests a high return on investing in the full coverage of contraceptives and maternal health services (Kelly et al., 2023).

One of the most worrying trends is the increasing prevalence of HIV/AIDS in some SIDS. Despite enormous improvements in treatment globally – and in SIDS regions – many island states struggle to access sufficient medicines and achieve the extent of viral suppression evident elsewhere. The Caribbean still exhibits the highest HIV prevalence rates globally after sub-Saharan Africa, and to some degree this links to the marginalisation of sexual minorities alluded to earlier (UNAIDS, 2025a). Although infection rates have declined since 2010, some countries (Barbados, Belize, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica, Suriname) still have relatively high incidence rates (UNAIDS, 2025a). In

the Pacific, Fiji is experiencing a rise due to the practice of sharing needles in drug use. Combined with high levels of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), a major health crisis is potentially in the making, for which attention will be required to overcome associated stigma (UNAIDS, 2025b).

Communicable, non-communicable and infectious diseases

NCDs and mental health dominate health concerns in SIDS, although communicable and vector-borne diseases prevail that are exacerbated by climate emergencies.

Obesity is driven by limited access to affordable, nutritious food and reliance on imported foods that are high in fats, salt and sugar.

NCDs are increasingly associated with impoverishment due to environmental and economic crises, increasing urbanisation and a relative lack of investment in ensuring food security through fresh food production (Rezaei et al., 2026). Cardiovascular diseases, cancer, diabetes and chronic respiratory disease are disproportionately prevalent in SIDS. Indeed, the latest available data from 2021 show that 7 of the 13 countries globally with over 30% risk of premature death between the ages of 30 and 70 years are SIDS. They are Haiti, Samoa, Fiji and Vanuatu, with the risk rising to over 40% for the Solomon Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia and Kiribati (WHO, 2024). Only the high-income states of Singapore and the Maldives fall at or below the 10% risk threshold (WHO, 2024). Life expectancy has stagnated or declined in some Pacific SIDS (e.g., Nauru) (WHO, 2024), while obesity rates

in 33 SIDS exceed the global adult average of 15.8%, with the top seven countries all in the Pacific (FAO, 2022a). This rising NCD burden is straining health and economic systems (Elliott et al., 2024).

Tobacco use, harmful alcohol use, air pollution and physical inactivity rates differ across SIDS but they are generally comparable to global averages. However, healthy diet indicators show a specific and increased risk for SIDS (WHO, 2023). Obesity is driven by limited access to affordable, nutritious food and reliance on imported foods that are high in fats, salt and sugar (WHO, 2023). This is exacerbated by declining local food production, inequitable trade policies, food ‘dumping’, long-term impacts of food aid (i.e., increased tinned fish and meat, rice and noodles in the Pacific) and climate change (Savage et al., 2020).

Priorities include increasing local food production where possible, promoting healthy diets and ensuring food and nutrition security and sovereignty.

Ten SIDS, including Haiti, Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, have undernourishment rates above the global average of 8.7% (FAO, 2022a). Belize, Haiti, the Maldives, Nauru and Timor-Leste meet the recommended daily servings in only three of the eight food groups. Meanwhile, no SIDS meet these recommended servings for micronutrients, with particularly low availability in Guinea-Bissau, Nauru, Timor-Leste, Haiti, Kiribati, and St. Kitts and Nevis.

Pacific SIDS experience more severe micronutrient deficiencies than Caribbean SIDS and AIS SIDS (Atzori et al., 2024).

The collection of recent, country-specific and uniform data is critical here, to design evidence-based policy to address these trends (Atzori et al., 2024). While NCD prevention requires healthy diets and regular exercise, managing NCDs requires lifelong access to quality care and reduced exposure to risk factors (WHO, 2024). Rising adolescent obesity suggests worsening trends in SIDS (WHO, 2023). In 2021, only 13% of SIDS had policies limiting unhealthy food marketing to children, compared to 44% of other countries. And by 2023, only half of Pacific nations had adopted sugar-sweetened beverage taxes, with mixed outcomes shaped by policy and the political economy (Elliott et al., 2024).

Tackling NCD challenges requires coordinated, multisectoral action that acknowledges the links between NCDs, climate change and food security (Rezaei et al., 2026). Priorities include increasing local food production where possible, promoting healthy diets and ensuring food and nutrition security and sovereignty (Guell et al., 2024). It is also critical that countries address trade liberalisation and corporate influence, limit unhealthy imports, and implement regulatory and fiscal measures including removing value added tax on essential foods to address commercial determinants of health (Rezaei et al., 2026).

Overburdened health systems, especially in SIDS, face added strain from NCDs, which increase costs, reduce incomes and disproportionately impact women

as caregivers. Meanwhile, preventing communicable diseases requires sufficient uptake of childhood immunisations and close attention to ensuring access to potable water (Guell et al., 2024). Services must be strengthened to deal with the treatment and consequences of major health crises.

Mental health, health systems and inclusion

Mental health is connected to climate change, physical inactivity (itself exacerbated by rising temperatures) and harmful alcohol use, and it is a growing but currently neglected issue in SIDS (Tiatia et al., 2022). Between 2017 and 2020, for instance, fewer than one third of 32 SIDS self-reported that they had integrated mental health services into primary healthcare (WHO, 2023).

Health information systems are generally in poor condition in SIDS and healthcare ranging from infant and child services to maternal health and palliative care are often unaffordable (Dawson et al., 2021). Palliative care is increasingly needed in SIDS but remains under-resourced (Spratt, 2019), and infant health is under threat from rising disease prevalence and both slow- and fast-moving climate change. Growing immunisation rates do tell a positive story though, with several Caribbean countries having made the failure to vaccinate a child an offence (Evans-Gilbert et al., 2023).

Data collection needs to be undertaken to monitor these trends, but it should also be extended to include more vulnerable groups like adolescents, those living with disabilities and LGBTQIA+ people.

People living with disabilities – mostly identified using a medical model of disability which generally does not consider the whole person – are considered to still be mostly out of sight in SIDS (Mafile'o and Vakalahi, 2018; Stephenson, 2019). That said, 14 out of 15 Pacific SIDS have ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). And, guided by the Pacific Framework for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2016–2025, many are now aligning national legislation with the requirements of the CRPD.

Health information systems are generally in poor condition in SIDS and healthcare ranging from infant and child services to maternal health and palliative care are often unaffordable.

Although there is growing acceptance in some states of gender-diverse people, they are still a highly vulnerable group in terms of their economic status, healthcare needs and social inclusion, and they are unevenly recognised across SIDS regions. This means LGBTQIA+ individuals in many SIDS still face significant challenges (Idris, 2021). There are promising signs of what is possible and what more needs to be done though. Some positive legal shifts have been made in Antigua and Barbuda, Belize, Barbados, St. Kitts and Nevis, and Dominica, for example, which have all decriminalised homosexuality. By and large, however, gender-diverse perspectives and those favouring sexual minorities are still largely absent in policy.



A chef prepares tropical fruits and vegetables, Nassau, the Bahamas. Photo: Craig Adderley/Pexels.

Food systems and nutrition

Access to healthy food and safe water is critically important for addressing gendered social inequalities, improving health outcomes, and enabling societies to flourish across all SIDS.

In 2022, 31% of people surveyed in SIDS said they were unable to eat healthy and nutritious food and were eating less than they thought they should ([Gordon-Strachan et al., 2025](#)). Moreover, an additional 2.6 million people experienced moderate to severe food insecurity due to increased heatwaves and droughts compared with the annual 1981–2010 average ([Gordon-Strachan et al., 2025](#)). Both the prevalence and individual experiences of food insecurity and undernourishment differ across SIDS, however.

Data vary in quality and timeliness and are rarely disaggregated by sex. This limits understanding, particularly in relation to women and children ([FAO et al., 2024](#)). For instance, a high prevalence of stunting among children under five years of age has been recorded for four Pacific SIDS (Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, the Marshall Islands and the Solomon Islands) but without sex disaggregation ([ADB, 2024](#)).

Food systems, food security and food sovereignty in SIDS are shaped by a complex interplay of factors – structural constraints, colonial legacies, vulnerability to fluctuating global markets, market liberalisation, climate change and extreme weather events, threats to domestic agriculture and fisheries production, and limited land availability ([Thompson, 2019](#); [Brugulat-Panés et al.,](#)

2025; Gordon-Strachan et al., 2025). These dynamics contribute to rising levels of food imports (up to 90% in some SIDS); declining levels of local food production;⁸ poor availability, affordability and access to healthy and nutritious foods; and rising rates of NCDs (Thompson, 2018).

Colonial legacies – particularly inequitable international food production and trading systems and, from 1995, the World Trade Organization's (WTO) rules-based international trading regime favouring developed states – continue to impact food-producing livelihoods, identities and opportunities in SIDS today (Thompson, 2021). Plus, they intersect with systematic internal barriers across multiple intersecting axes of inequality – such as gender, race, class – which must all be taken into account to progress the ABAS.

Women's paid and unpaid labour and their care and subsistence work supports food production, processing, distribution and consumption. Their contributions are vital to rural and urban livelihoods, food security and national economies. Traditionally, subsistence production has been central to food security across all SIDS. And women – through activities such as keeping home gardens and small plots; fishing; raising poultry, ruminant and other livestock such as pigs for traditional cultural exchange ceremonies and for home consumption; processing or preservation – have been central to this economy. Recent research in Fiji and St. Vincent and the Grenadines finds that home gardens remain pertinent, despite there being a generational shift among

rural dwellers towards purchasing more food and increased consumption of processed, imported and fast foods. In these locations, home gardens are highly valued for supplying households with staple foods and for supporting health and livelihoods (Guell et al., 2021).

Small-scale fisheries are another important source of sustenance, subsistence and livelihoods in coastal and rural SIDS communities, and women play a key role here too. In Fiji, for example, iTaukei women fishers contribute significantly to household food security and income because, according to cultural norms, their primary role is to provide food for their family. Because this work is often unpaid, informal and part-time, however, their contribution is often invisible, officially ignored and unrecognised (Thomas et al., 2021). To adapt to changing times, women are fishing in a wider range of habitats and selling part of their catch to supplement household income. They still fish close to home though due to their care and domestic duties (Thomas et al., 2021).

In Kiribati, women play an important role in post-harvest fisheries, marketing catch to urban workers on Tarawa. Although this role is visible, it is unsupported and officially unrecorded, similar to women's inshore gleaning activities that regularly put nutritious marine food on the family table. Indeed, the UN's Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE) Programme in Kiribati has been criticised for failing to consider women involved in marine-based activities in income-generating activities and therefore for excluding them from support (Gotschall, 2021).

8 Papua New Guinea is an outlier, producing 80% of its food.

Box 3.2 Understanding power relations and gender equality in fisheries policy

Lawless et al. (2021) examine how gender equality is constructed and implemented in small-scale fisheries policy across three Pacific Island nations: Fiji, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. They find that the concept of gender is frequently narrowed to focus on women's issues, rather than on the power dynamics of gendered social identities, norms and relations. The rationale for pursuing 'gender equality' is often instrumental (i.e., aimed at pursuing environmental goals) rather than intrinsic (i.e., based on pursuing fairness).

Over two-thirds of gender equality strategies from these island nations focus on internal human resourcing and project assessments, rather than on engagement with communities. The authors suggest a paradigm shift is needed to:

1. recognise that gender is more than just a focus on women
2. value gender equality intrinsically rather than instrumentally
3. address relational and structural inequalities across multiple levels of governance
4. develop stronger partnerships with gender and development experts to gradually transfer capacity and expertise to the fisheries sector.

Women also constitute approximately 52% of the agricultural labour force in SIDS (FAO, 2020 and 2022b). Most are engaged in the informal sector, which allows them to balance productive activities with domestic responsibilities. In many SIDS – including Barbados, St. Lucia, Samoa, and São Tomé and Príncipe – women exhibit lower levels of participation and decision-making authority compared to men at the value chain, community and household levels (FAO, 2022b). This disparity persists even within matrilineal societies such as Palau and Comoros and, to a lesser extent, in the Caribbean region (FAO, 2022b). In Fiji, rural-based agricultural food producers – including women producers – supply fresh produce for town dwellers through urban markets. Individuals bear increasingly high costs of transportation

by commercial carriers plus market fees though, which sometimes mean that produce is unaffordable for low-income urban workers.

The sustainable management of local food production and processing is vital for food security, livelihoods and poverty alleviation.

Despite their critical role in small-scale fisheries, in farming and in processing sectors that underpin rural livelihoods in SIDS, women's labour remains largely invisible and undervalued. They are also significantly underrepresented at the policy and management levels too (Mangubhai and Lawless, 2021; UNDP, 2022).

The sustainable management of local food production (both for the market and subsistence) and processing is vital for food security, livelihoods and poverty alleviation. It is essential that women's production

is counted through sex-disaggregated data, and that they can play a greater role in decision-making and policy creation so their contributions and needs are visible and acknowledged ([Thomas et al., 2021](#)).

Box 3.3 COVID-19 as a driver of structural and gendered inequalities

COVID-19 disproportionately affected women in SIDS. The pandemic brought about greater job and income losses for women than men, plus they took on increased caregiving and food-provision responsibilities and faced heightened vulnerability to GBV.

In Pacific SIDS, movement restrictions and market closures reduced rural women's income, which negatively affected family welfare due to their inability to pay school fees and purchase nutritious foods and phone credit ([Davila et al., 2021](#)). The urban poor in Fiji, Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands were most affected by food price hikes, job losses and their inability to benefit from state-supported household food production efforts ([Davila et al., 2021](#)).

In response to job and remittance losses, and also reduced access to cash, there was a resurgence of traditional Indigenous barter systems for food (such as Barter for Better Fiji), and of land- and resource-sharing between households ([Finau and Kant, 2022](#); [Iese et al., 2021](#); [Ratuva et al., 2024](#)). Meanwhile, in Fiji, Samoa and the Solomon Islands, innovative use of social media and WhatsApp supported the growth of cashless e-commerce systems, enabling access to essential goods where governments lacked capacity to implement sufficient relief packages ([Davila et al., 2021](#); [Finau and Scobie, 2022](#)).

The pandemic highlighted structural inequalities in food systems too ([Davila et al., 2021](#)), with sociodemographic factors shaping pandemic experiences throughout the agri-food supply chain. Across nine Caribbean countries – Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados, Jamaica, Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, Grenada, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines – the most adverse effects of the pandemic were experienced among food producers, distributors, service operators and consumers with the lowest household incomes and education levels ([Daley et al., 2023](#)). Small, unregistered and rural businesses also fared badly. Consumers used 36% more of their own food and grew 35% more of their own food, with significantly higher rates seen in Trinidad and Tobago attributed to early government efforts to upskill small producers ([Daley et al., 2023](#)).

3.2.3 Building equitable and fair societies

The ABAS underscores the importance of building equitable and fair societies, and of promoting the realisation of equity and equality across all stages of the life course. Central to this are the uneven and disproportionate ways that poverty, inequality, unemployment and ill-health affect people in vulnerable situations, particularly women, children, youth, people living with disabilities, the elderly, LGBTQIA+ persons, Indigenous persons and migrants.

Caring work

Caring for communities and people is central to SIDS societies. Almost everywhere, the role of primary caregiver to children and youth, people living with disabilities, older persons and the sick is traditionally assigned to women. Women undertake a disproportionate amount of unpaid labour and care, therefore, and in times of crisis they are more likely than men to take on additional caring and domestic responsibilities. This has critical implications for climate change and disaster governance.

Care work underpins societal and economic transformation in SIDS, yet it remains largely invisible, unrecognised and undervalued.

The intrinsic expectation that women's unpaid labour will meet all human needs encompasses the provision of food, fuel and water, and it also includes absorbing the impacts of the mental health crisis, violence and poverty (Valiani, 2022). In many cases, the triple burden can become a quadruple

one – because women are often on the first-response frontline or undertake vital functions within healthcare infrastructures and so internalise on behalf of their societies the trauma of caring for those who are dying.

Care work includes unpaid and also paid direct and indirect support and services provided by the public and private sector, by non-profit and religious organisations, by social and solidarity economies, by households and family (ILO, 2024). Not only are there many domains of care provision, but experiences of both giving and receiving care are impacted by differences of gender, race, ethnicity, class, age, disability, sexuality, religion and migration status.

Care work underpins societal and economic transformation in SIDS, yet it remains largely invisible, unrecognised and undervalued (Valiani, 2022). To achieve the aims of the ABAS, gendered patterns of social reproduction and care need to be given significantly greater visibility and value. Attention is needed to recognise, remunerate and redistribute care work and to increase state support. A gendered perspective should be applied in all policy and planning.

Social protection

The ABAS highlights that robust health and social protection systems are essential for healthy and flourishing societies and to support resilience and adaptation. Social protection ensures access to healthcare and income security for all across the life course, through sickness, unemployment, injury, pregnancy, childhood, disability and old age.

When these systems are inadequate, the poorest and most vulnerable are disproportionately impacted. Although



Woman weaving basket, Kiribati.
Photo: Raimon Kataotao/Pexels.

SIDS have expanded their social protection coverage, there are significant disparities between them, and progress remains insufficient and below the global average in all areas except for work injury benefits (ILO, 2025). Underinvestment is a key challenge. SIDS currently allocate an average of 7.1% of gross domestic product (GDP) to social protection and health, compared to the 19.3% global average (ILO, 2025). Furthermore, the gendered dimensions of social welfare are generally understudied in the Global South.

COVID-19 highlighted the disproportionate impact of crises on women, in terms of job losses, reduced services, and increased care and mental health burdens. This has led to greater recognition of the need to develop holistic social protection systems that protect women and other vulnerable groups throughout the whole life course, rather

than solely focusing on particular points in an individual's life cycle, such as maternity (Cookson et al., 2024).

COVID-19 social protection programmes in SIDS often lacked gender perspectives and paid insufficient attention to care and informal work. For example, in Trinidad and Tobago, the government's COVID-19 support strategy lacked explicit mention of unpaid domestic and care work, while cash transfers excluded informal workers and so disproportionately impacted women (Roopnarine and Brizan, 2025). In Barbados, policies also lacked attention to care and informal work and therefore reproduced gender- and class-based inequalities (Bobb and Worrell, 2025).

To be truly gender-responsive, governments must address gendered risks and inequalities across all roles occupied (such as worker, carer and elder person) across the life

course (Cookson et al., 2024). Despite a comprehensive welfare state in Mauritius, for example, social welfare policies do not consider gender perspectives and they overlook specific social risks and vulnerabilities. There is no provision for parental leave, flexible working or affordable childcare and policies do not recognise unpaid care work, which restricts women's labour market participation (Tandrayen-Ragoobur et al., 2021). Contribution-based pension schemes also disadvantage women, whose contributions are often interrupted by caregiving (Tandrayen-Ragoobur et al., 2021).

While maternity leave legislation exists across most SIDS, lengths and benefits vary. Self-employed, domestic, informal, agricultural, family and migrant workers are often excluded from statutory rights to paid maternity leave. Moreover, a 'childcare policy gap' often leaves women facing a gap between maternity leave and securing childcare. Paternity and parental leave are also vital for the redistribution of care work and changing gender norms about male caregiving, but few SIDS currently offer paid paternity leave. In the Caribbean, Barbados has recently granted fathers three weeks of paid paternity leave, following only Suriname (eight days) and the Dominican Republic (two days).

Social protection levels vary across SIDS depending on their demographic profile (age distribution, dependency ratios, migration and so forth). The Caribbean share of the SIDS population is expected to decrease from 63% to 58% by 2050, while the Pacific share will increase from 21% to 25%, and AIS from 16% to 18% (UNDESA, 2023). Ageing populations mean that comprehensive social protection systems are needed that encompass affordable healthcare, pension schemes, welfare

support and long-term care services to protect the well-being and dignity of older persons: 'the varying health profiles across SIDS require targeted health-care strategies to provide specialized care for ageing populations' (Bassarsky et al., 2024: 4).

Relatedly, the quality of public health systems in some Pacific SIDS has deteriorated markedly due to reduced budgetary support and development aid that is needed for upgrades and repairs (Edelman et al., 2025). Meanwhile, private hospitals are growing in number and this is consequently weakening pressure to upgrade public hospitals. In some SIDS, pension funds have been reconceptualised and used as investment capital at the expense of pensioners. This reflects neoliberal ideas of opening up pension funds for investment, reducing pensions and extending the pensionable age. New donor-driven 'social protection' systems have been similarly driven by the 'joint aims of alleviating poverty and achieving inclusive economic growth' (Slatter, 2020).

Education, employment, youth empowerment and well-being

Sustained investment in primary and early childhood education has raised school enrolment numbers in SIDS, with a sizable number of countries achieving universal secondary education too. This has had positive knock-on effects in terms of educational attainment, although policy interventions are still needed to bridge school-learning gaps so that human development can be enhanced.

Some SIDS, especially in the Caribbean, have gradually reoriented investments towards technical and vocational education. The aim has been to enhance workforce

mobility and promote human resource upgrading to provide new opportunities in emergent service industries (Jules, 2015; Jules et al., 2022).

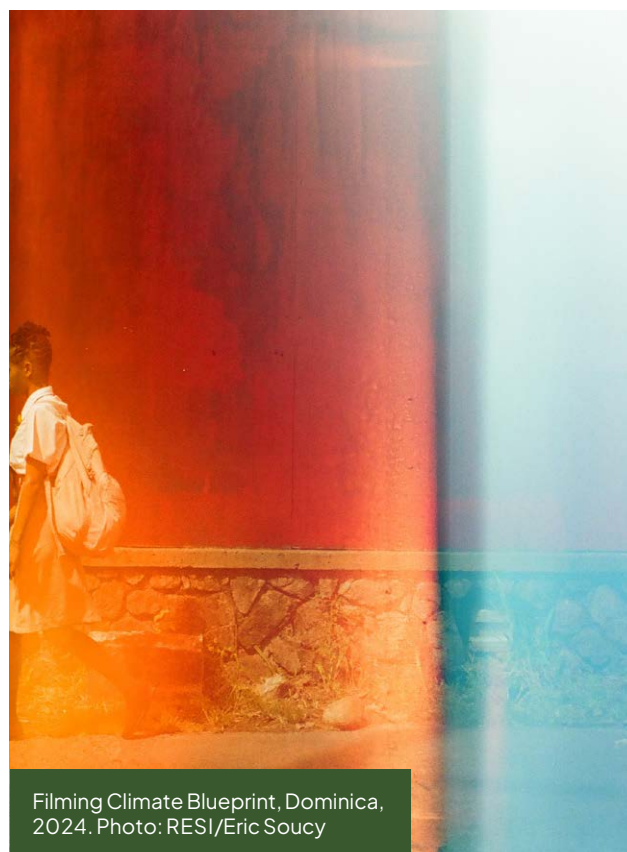
By and large, though, most SIDS experience structural constraints in terms of educational delivery (Massa et al., 2022). In the Caribbean, gross enrolment rates have tended to be higher than in other SIDS regions and countries benefit from a well-institutionalised tradition of regional examinations, teacher training and standards via the Caribbean Examinations Council (Jules and Arnold, 2021). But Caribbean states have also experienced significant ‘brain drain’, with many of the most highly educated and skilled people migrating to North America and Europe (Massa et al., 2022; Brissett, 2023).

Pacific SIDS experience more acute geographic dispersion, which can make educational delivery difficult and therefore attainment gains uneven. Regional policy also tends to focus on access and delivery (i.e., distance learning) rather than harmonisation. Educational inequalities intersect with other challenges – poverty, nutritional deficits, domestic violence and teen pregnancy – which, together, lead to relatively high levels of early educational withdrawal (Massa et al., 2022).

There are significant pockets of young people across all SIDS who are not in employment, education or training (NEETs), but this is more pronounced in parts of the Pacific (Massa et al., 2022). Regional variation reflects wider differences in labour market and migration opportunities that incentivise particular kinds of educational attainment. Ongoing challenges in the provision of high-quality education and in unemployment

then have flow-on labour market effects. And, additionally, without public and private investment in SIDS to absorb their educated citizens, labour mobility programmes abroad to meet shortages continue to grow and deprive SIDS of valued youthful populations.

Overall, some progress has been made in the education sector, but concerns remain about the suitability of curricula and educational quality in some places (Jugessur and Ramessur, 2024). Some commentators have described this as a ‘learning crisis’ (Massa et al., 2022). The absence of effective comprehensive sexuality education in schools has been noted, for example (Lazarus, 2019). Meanwhile, there is a growing focus on sports for development as a means of uplifting youth and their well-being (McCree, 2025; Wanner and Siefken, 2024), but the gendered dimensions of some programmes are missing.



Filming Climate Blueprint, Dominica, 2024. Photo: RESI/Eric Soucy

Box 3.4 The importance of civil society and social movements in SIDS

Civil society, women's and community organisations have long been central to social, economic, political and environmental change in SIDS. These organisations articulate everyday realities and mobilise bottom-up collective action. They hold states to account and often fill gaps in social provision and service delivery left by neoliberal reform and fiscal constraint (Naidu and Slatter, 2023; Briguglio et al., 2023).

In SIDS, civil society and community organisations are particularly active around gender, race, sexuality, disability and inequality, health and well-being, environmental justice, political empowerment, human rights, education, poverty alleviation and reparatory justice (Peck and Hammett, 2022).

For example, in response to the volcanic eruption of La Soufrière in 2020 in St. Vincent and the Grenadines, a grassroots approach to disaster risk management by community-based organisations proved important, particularly in remote communities (Cruickshank et al., 2023).

Civil society groups and social movements often face constraints and challenges, however. Although there is growing social acceptance of LGBTQIA+ rights in Trinidad and Tobago and in Mauritius, for example, nascent LGBTQIA+ movements encounter obstacles related to funding and legal traditions inherited from colonial times (Andrew et al., 2023). In the Seychelles, civil society organisations have been key in advancing non-violent social change, yet lack of funding is a constraint (Benoit, 2023). And in Toco, in Trinidad and Tobago, rural community groups have unique insights into climate and health, yet they often feel alienated from climate-health governance processes due to a disconnect between local community priorities and national and regional climate-health goals (Scobie et al., 2023).

3.3 Evidence and knowledge gaps

Gendered and intersecting inequalities need to be addressed across all dimensions and sectors in SIDS – not solely those perceived to fall within the social and cultural sphere. Some progress has been made, and there is a broader commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment demonstrated in the implementation of some gender-

sensitive and gender-responsive policies in SIDS. However, in general, policies aimed at advancing social and gender equality are often still considered a low priority.

Current approaches to gender inequality and empowerment tend to remain instrumental in focus and have little transformational potential. There is often a limited conceptual understanding of gender and intersecting forms of discrimination (such as race,

ethnicity, disability, sexuality, age, Indigenous and migration status), which is compounded by a lack of sex- and gender-disaggregated data. This stifles the development of evidence-based policy that addresses social and gender inequality at its root. It also points to the significant shifts needed in gender equality narratives, policy and strategies to bring about meaningful change.

The paucity of baseline and disaggregated data extends to broader health and social domains. It includes lack of reliable monitoring of comprehensive health data on mortality, NCDs, suicide, mental health and other risk factors ([WHO, 2023](#)).

There is also a lack of research on the gender dimensions of social welfare policies. And the complex interplay of climate change with social and health determinants requires more integrated consideration too. Mental health is increasingly recognised as important but is often neglected in policy and research.

While there has been a necessary and welcome increase in ‘gender-responsive’ planning in SIDS, which recognises and seeks to address inequalities, a more concerted effort is needed to address underlying structural issues if gender-transformative change is to be achieved.

There are increasing calls for deeper engagement with both historical and contemporary dynamics that perpetuate intersecting inequalities. The dominance of neoliberal economic growth paradigms within development agendas continues to create differential, but often underexamined, gendered and social effects. There is a shrinking of social protection and public services, alongside the marginalisation of

issues such as care and unpaid reproductive work, which are significantly undervalued and under-recognised.

3.4 Emerging issues

Current knowledge underscores the challenge of building safer, healthier and flourishing societies without first recognising that complex social relations in SIDS are always gendered. More than this, evidence shows that multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and marginalisation due to gender, race, ethnicity, disability, sexuality, age, religion, and Indigenous and migration status are at play in all SIDS that must be addressed.

Civil society is becoming more vulnerable as aid architectures shift, as the private sector expands and as traditional donors retreat.

Poverty is increasing and it is deepening inequalities among already vulnerable groups, as well as among those who are precariously close to poverty. The care economy is critical to ensuring food security and to providing social protection, yet this labour is gendered in SIDS, as elsewhere, and work is often unpaid. And, although youthful aspirations are being expressed in SIDS and improvements in educational attainment show promise, efforts need to align with the legacies of sustainable, healthy and inclusive initiatives.

Simultaneously, civil society is becoming more vulnerable as aid architectures shift, as the private sector expands and as traditional donors retreat. This results in new challenges and shrinking civic space ([Peck](#)

and Hamnett, 2022). Given their vital role in advancing social and environmental justice and in delivering essential services, targeted support will be essential to ensure the survival of civil society organisations.

Climate change, extreme weather events and other disasters are known risk multipliers in SIDS. They worsen health threats directly and indirectly, and they deepen social inequities within marginalised groups who often face discrimination, risks such as GBV and lack of access to services. Poor infrastructure and unequal resource distribution then compound these vulnerabilities, while recent cutbacks in aid (especially HIV-specific funding) undermine efforts to tackle public health threats.

Inclusive and integrated disaster management is critical, but entrenched inequalities pose real challenges to the aspirations of SIDS governments to 'leave no-one behind'. Poverty and health- and gender-related inequality cannot be eradicated through a single-minded focus

on economic growth or on increasing productive capacities or on women's empowerment. These must be recognised as intersecting issues and addressed at their roots. The ABAS has the potential to be a circuit-breaker, if implementation pays attention to research-based evidence.

3.5 Looking ahead

SIDS governments need to be attentive to the global backlash against social and gender programmes. The rolling back of development finance, closure of development organisations such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and pushback against the World Health Organization and gender-sensitive health programming should make anyone who cares about social equity fearful. SIDS should also pay attention to the focus on green and climate finance policy agendas, which often take an instrumental approach to gender.



Sal Rei, Boa Vista, Cabo Verde. Photo: Eduardo Davo Fernandez/Shutterstock.

In some SIDS, illicit flows of drugs, people trafficking and weapons trafficking are increasing (Baird et al., 2023). This criminality will undermine social cohesion if it is not addressed through social policy and by strengthening the police and judiciary.

There is also a deeply concerning risk of SIDS becoming embroiled in, or impacted by, the possibility of open conflict among rival –including nuclear-armed – powers. This is given the present context of a new arms race, advances in warfare technology involving autonomous and unmanned submarines that are already in place in our oceans, and the use of artificial intelligence in precision targeting of strategic enemy installations. This is no time to be naïve.

It is imperative to increase the participation, accessibility and non-discrimination of women and other marginalised groups in all levels of policy, planning and governance. But a concerted effort is also needed to address underlying structural issues and their gendered impacts.

Inequality in SIDS is central to making sense of the social panorama, but it goes beyond economic inequality. While there have been improvements in income, health and education, these have not been experienced equally by different groups within many states. This has been especially true in the wake of a disaster or crisis. Women, youth, those living with disabilities and gender-non-conforming people will be affected more directly by a wider range of intersectional inequalities.

In studies of SGBV against women, violence is cited as repeated, intergenerational and grounded in harmful gendered assumptions that endorse men's proprietary attitudes towards women. Such violence is more likely to occur when other forms and conditions of inequality are present.

It is imperative to increase the participation, accessibility and non-discrimination of women and other marginalised groups in all levels of policy, planning and governance. But a concerted effort is also needed to address underlying structural issues and their gendered impacts. Relational and structural inequalities – including ancestral, historical and colonial dynamics, and how these deeply connect to contemporary challenges of gender, race, capitalism and resurgent nationalism – must be addressed across all levels of governance. Gender needs to be understood as being about a broader project of social and structural transformation.

Consequently, there needs to be a shift within SIDS to affirm gender equality and the equality of all citizens. This demands that equality be valued intrinsically and recognised as fair and just, rather than it be approached instrumentally to achieve economic goals. The paucity of data poses a major barrier to the development of evidence-based policy to address social and gender inequality – investment and attention is needed in this respect. Gender equality narratives, policy and strategies need to be advanced to bring about meaningful transformative change. The care economy must be taken seriously, and we must pivot more firmly towards equity, justice and the transformation of gender relations for the goals of the ABAS to be achievable.

4. BUILDING A SECURE FUTURE: ACCELERATING RESILIENT INFRASTRUCTURE AND ENERGY TRANSITIONS

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Summary

Small Island Developing States (SIDS) face common constraints that span renewable energy transitions, water resource management, resilient infrastructure, transportation and market connectivity. To realise a secure future in SIDS, these island nations need to follow a pathway of innovation and systems thinking with resilience as a common thread.

A secure future for SIDS is no longer a matter of incremental adaptation, but a strategic mandate for systemic decoupling from volatile global dependencies.

SIDS are often categorised as particularly vulnerable: this chapter reframes them as the frontline laboratory for global resilience. In an increasingly fragmented world – where traditional multilateral support is challenged and supply chains are often weaponised – SIDS must accelerate their transition to climate-proofed and integrated energy, water and transport systems.

The transition from fossil fuel dependence to renewable sovereignty is not merely an environmental goal. It is a fiscal necessity

and key component of resilience to external shocks. Additionally, by decentralising desalination, wastewater reuse and other infrastructure services, and by using more nature-based engineering solutions, SIDS can bypass failures of centralised, high-maintenance infrastructure.

Ultimately, building resilience in SIDS can provide net benefits to the global community. By pioneering digital trade linkages and robust inter-island connectivity, SIDS provide a scalable blueprint for the green transition required by all coastal nations. Securing the future of SIDS, therefore, is the ultimate proof of concept for climate-resilient communities worldwide.



4.1 Key debates

Building a secure future for SIDS is an urgent but also a long-term and complex agenda. It involves interconnected priorities around energy, water, infrastructure, transportation and market connectivity.

SIDS need to decide how energy, water and transport should be organised, weighing up the trade-offs between financing, reliability and delivery in centralised versus decentralised infrastructure. They must also consider hard versus soft infrastructure and how different approaches facilitate or hinder adaptation pathways. And they must address financing challenges in designing, implementing and maintaining complex infrastructures.

SIDS need to decide how energy, water and transport should be organised, weighing up the trade-offs between financing, reliability and delivery in centralised versus decentralised infrastructure.

4.1.1 The energy transition

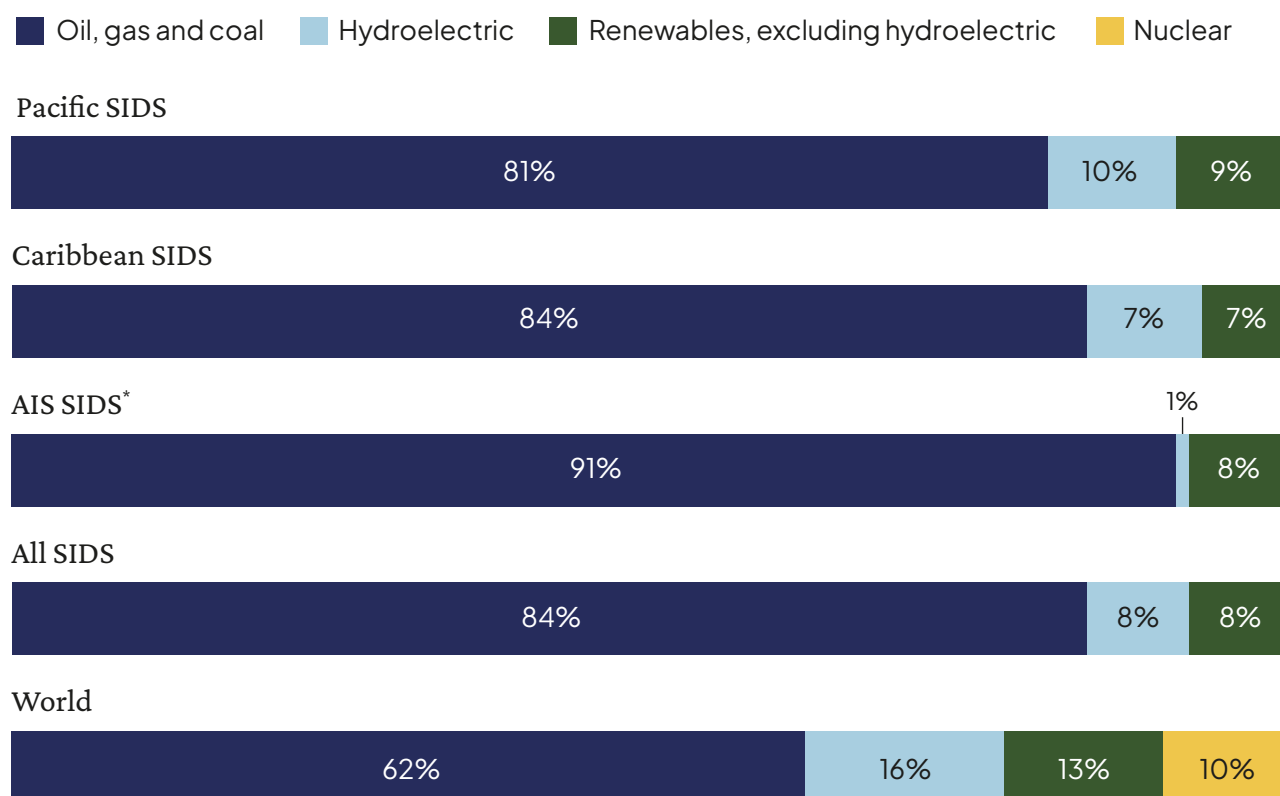
The Antigua and Barbuda Agenda for SIDS (ABAS) (UN-OHRLLS, 2024) places significant weight on the energy transition. While leaving open the possibility of continued fossil fuel use, it underscores the need for SIDS to accelerate a shift towards modern, efficient and cleaner energy systems. This emphasis recognises energy

as a cornerstone of resilience but also the practical urgency of reducing exposure to volatile global fuel markets and channelling resources towards long-term sustainability.

SIDS face significant energy security challenges due to their geographic isolation, small size and heavy reliance on expensive imported fossil fuels for electricity generation (Figure 4.1). On average, nearly two-thirds of SIDS import 90% of their fossil fuel supply for electricity generation (UNDP, 2024a). This dependence exposes them to volatile global oil prices and diverts scarce capital that could otherwise support critical development priorities. It also results in exceptionally high electricity costs across island nations.

For example, the Solomon Islands has the most expensive electricity in the world, at a cost seven times higher than in the United States, while Caribbean countries face electricity costs that are twice as high as in the US (IEA, 2024). On average, Caribbean nations spend 9% of their gross domestic product (GDP) on oil importation, while Pacific countries spend around 7.5% (Syngellakis and Johnston, 2024).

Despite these challenges, SIDS have made progress in energy access, with many achieving close to 100% electrification rates. Disparities persist within and between some rural and urban areas, however, and significant gaps remain in access to clean cooking energy in particular. In 2022, for instance, an average of 85.5% of rural populations in Caribbean SIDS had access to clean cooking energy, but the Pacific average stood at only 25.9% (UNDP, 2024a).

Figure 4.1 Electricity production by source, 2021

Note: *Excluding Singapore. AIS = Atlantic, Indian Ocean and South China Sea. Group averages for SIDS countries are computed as the arithmetic mean of the ratios of individual countries.

Source: World Bank (n.d.-a), World Development Indicators (<https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators>), 22 January 2026.

A fundamental tension exists between the goal of achieving 100% renewable energy and ensuring a reliable and consistent electricity supply for national development. Transitioning to renewable and sustainable energy systems (solar photovoltaic (PV) systems, including floating solar PV, wind, hydro, geothermal and others) is a central pillar of a secure future for SIDS, but this shift raises key debates regarding the cost, scale and reliability of integrating renewables.

Meanwhile, energy-related vulnerabilities show how structural dependencies on imported fossil fuels and manufactured

products increase SIDS' exposure to external volatile markets that are beyond their control (Genave et al., 2020).

4.1.2 Water security

Water security is another equally pressing challenge, requiring coordinated action to safeguard human well-being, ecosystems and economic stability.

SIDS face extreme exposure to sea-level rise: 22 million people in the Caribbean live below 6m elevation (Cashman and Nagdee, 2017), while over 90% of Pacific Islanders

reside within 5km of the coast, with much infrastructure less than 500m from shore (Andrew et al., 2019). In the Indian Ocean, the sea level is rising considerably faster than the global average, threatening the many low-lying SIDS (Jyoti et al., 2019).

Caribbean SIDS need to continually look at current and future availability of water because climate change has made droughts and floods more severe on many islands (Roopnarine et al., 2023). Extreme weather patterns are worsening and clean drinking water resources are becoming more vulnerable. These depend on rainfall, surface water (rivers, tributaries, lakes) and groundwater resources including aquifer recharge.

For Caribbean island nations, resilience requires an integrated water resources management approach plus new critical infrastructure, such as hydro-systems for desalination, rainfall collection and wastewater reuse. These SIDS must also periodically deal with changes in rainfall patterns and the loss of watersheds alongside pressure from population growth and from unplanned and unsustainable urbanisation, especially in larger settlements, capital cities and major islands. Water resources management must protect fragile aquifers and make it easier to collect rainwater for both potable and non-potable consumption. It is therefore important to change how the Caribbean region uses water and to identify equitable, sustainable practices to ensure long-term resilience (Mycoo and Roopnarine, 2024).

Pacific SIDS face persistent and multi-dimensional water security challenges driven by limited freshwater availability, climate

variability and governance constraints. Many Pacific atoll countries, including Tuvalu, Kiribati, the Marshall Islands and Tokelau, rely almost entirely on rainwater and fragile shallow groundwater lenses that are highly vulnerable to drought and saltwater intrusion (Iese et al., 2024). In Kiribati, for example, around 65% of households depend on rainwater and 10% on desalination, yet only 40% have access to safely managed drinking water due to contamination risks (Ojha and Schofield, 2022). Rural communities in several countries rely predominantly on self-supplied water – in Fiji, Kiribati, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, 75% of rural households depend on their own water sources for basic use (Ralagi et al., 2025).



Filming Climate Blueprint, Dominica, 2024. Photo: RESI/Eric Soucy.

Drought impacts compound these vulnerabilities. Atolls such as Tuvalu and the Marshall Islands can rapidly deplete their freshwater lenses during meteorological drought, and severe El Niño droughts can affect multiple countries simultaneously ([Ilese et al., 2021](#)). Water governance constraints remain significant: several countries lack fully implemented water quality policies, while water quality monitoring is limited or absent in many atoll states ([Ilese et al., 2024](#)). Community-managed water systems dominate in Fiji, Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands, but implementation of water safety planning (WSP) is often incomplete ([Souter et al., 2024](#)). In Vanuatu, for example, only 22% of communities undertook planned no- or low-cost improvements after WSP training ([Rand et al., 2022](#)).

Water supplies are highly sensitive to energy costs, infrastructure reliability and climate-driven demand pressures.

In Atlantic, Indian Ocean and South China Sea (AIS) SIDS, water security challenges are increasingly shaped by dependence on energy-intensive desalination and limited natural freshwater storage. This means water supplies are highly sensitive to energy costs, infrastructure reliability and climate-driven demand pressures ([Gheuens et al., 2019](#); [UNDP, 2024a](#)).

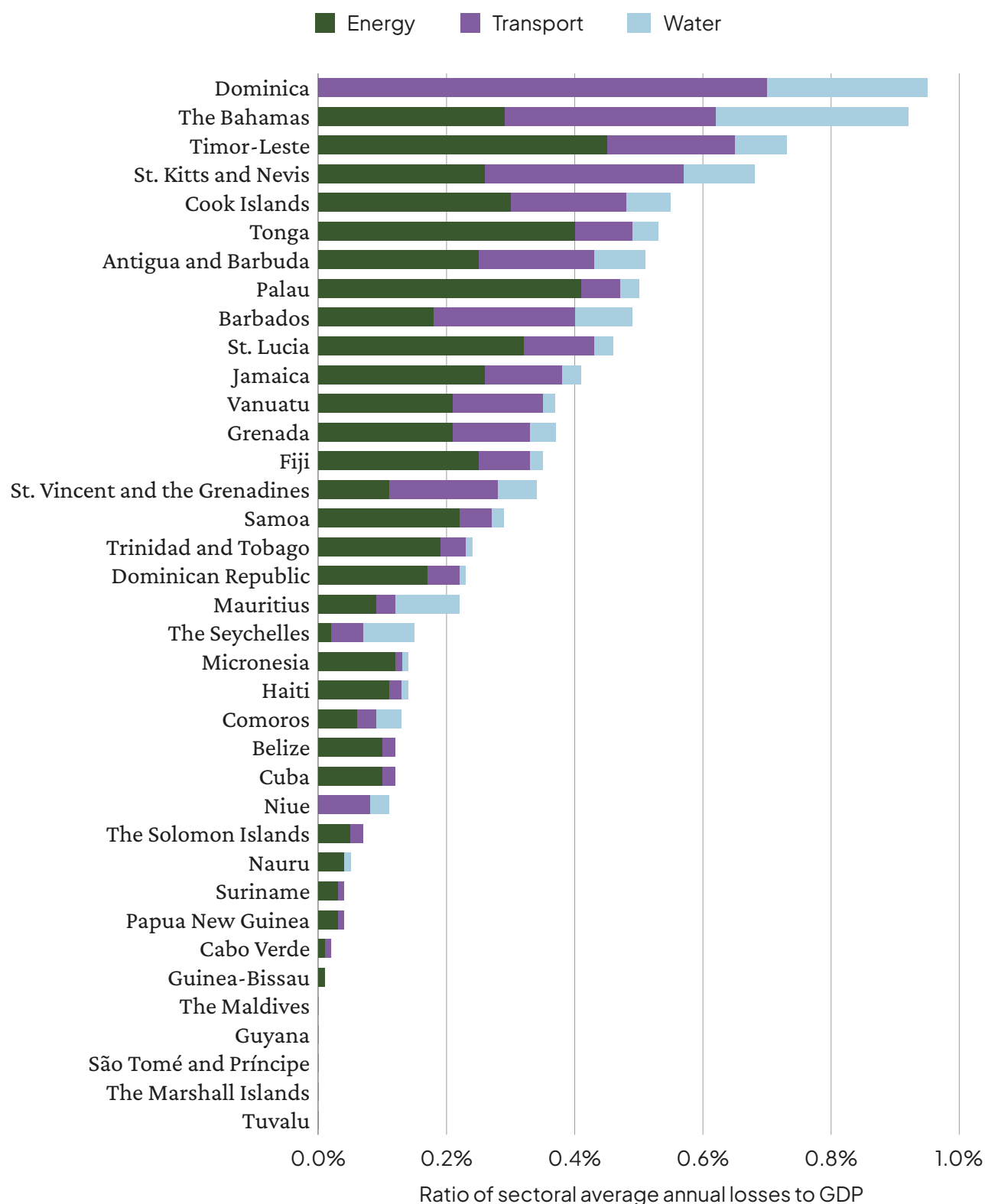
Strategies vary but, across SIDS regions, ecosystem-based approaches and green infrastructure are gaining traction. This includes mangrove restoration, wetland protection, watershed management and

stormwater-absorbing urban landscapes ([Brown et al., 2026](#)). But water security in SIDS also requires integrated approaches that combine improved rainwater harvesting systems, decentralised desalination and risk-based planning tools that involve traditional knowledge and community governance systems ([Ralagi et al., 2025](#); [Ilese et al., 2024](#)).

4.1.3 Infrastructure, transport and market connectivity

Infrastructural resilience is about ensuring that critical systems remain functional and connected even under stress. Nowhere is this more critical than in the transportation sector, which serves as the backbone of trade, mobility and regional integration for SIDS. These systems face structural challenges though: high logistics and fuel costs, monopoly routes dominated by a few carriers, trade restrictions, poor connectivity, and a range of sociopolitical and regulatory barriers ([Dyer, 2024](#)). SIDS continue to experience pandemic disruptions, tariff volatility and more intense climate impacts, while at the same time trying to advance sustainable and eco-friendly transport options, diversifying trade, reviving inter-island shipping and ferry routes, and exploring innovative connectivity solutions ([Arvis et al., 2023](#); [CPCS Transcom International and Hamilton, 2018](#); [Nuttall et al., 2021](#)).

Overall, although SIDS experience low absolute annual average losses from disasters (in US\$ billions), they face relatively high sums as a percentage of GDP infrastructure losses (Figure 4.2). Indeed, the repair and rehabilitation needs from one event can be higher than 100% of GDP, which is never a risk for larger countries.

Figure 4.2 Average annual disaster losses in infrastructure, % GDP

Source: CDRI (n.d.), GIRI & key figures (<https://giri.unepgrid.ch/facts-figures/multi-hazards>); World Bank (n.d.-b), World Development Indicators (<https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators>).

Ensuring reliable and sustainable transportation networks facilitates movement within and between islands, and it also lays the groundwork for broader economic integration. Yet, today, physical mobility alone is not sufficient: prosperity increasingly depends on the ability of SIDS to connect digitally and commercially with regional and global markets. Market connectivity, therefore – broadly encompassing digital connectivity (internet and telecommunications) for businesses and services, trade links and integration into global value chains – is vital for the future prosperity of SIDS.

Many SIDS are geographically isolated though ([Briguglio, 1995](#)), which limits their economic diversification and access to essential services. Persistent digital divides driven by poor bandwidth and high internet costs ([ITU, 2024](#)) highlight the need for improved information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure. Initiatives like submarine fibre-optic cables and preferential trade agreements are helping reduce isolation and vulnerability, enabling SIDS to overcome size and distance constraints and better integrate into global markets. However, continued efforts are needed to enhance affordability, accessibility and inclusivity, and also to improve related policy, legislation and regulation of digital and trade infrastructure so SIDS can fully realise the benefits of market connectivity ([UNDP, 2024b](#)).

In fact, ensuring that islands remain connected to markets, knowledge and financial flows is increasingly seen as just as important as physical mobility. Debates around market connectivity in SIDS centre on how nations can overcome inherent

barriers of scale, remoteness and limited domestic markets to compete in the global economy.

A key concern is the challenge of a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach ([UNDP, 2024b](#)). SIDS are often analysed as a homogenous group, but they are diverse and averages conceal vast disparities in connectivity ([ITU, 2024](#)). For instance, some countries (e.g., the Bahamas, Barbados and Singapore) record higher than global average rates of digital connectivity, while others (e.g., Guinea-Bissau, Haiti and Kiribati) have lower ICT development scores.

Caribbean SIDS are already leveraging higher internet penetration and proximity to the Americas for outsourcing, and Indian Ocean SIDS like Mauritius have been using strategic location and connectivity to become financial and logistics hubs. But Pacific SIDS are only beginning to explore opportunities in the digital economy.

Given the wide scope of market connectivity, coherent policy is needed across sectors to ensure alignment and focus. At the same time, however, approaches must be tailored and policies attuned to the realities and needs of local contexts to achieve meaningful market connectivity.

4.1.4 Sustainable transitions: centralised versus decentralised infrastructure systems

A core debate shaping sustainable transitions in SIDS concerns the balance between centralised and decentralised infrastructure systems across energy and water sectors. This debate is not purely technical; it reflects deeper trade-offs between scale and

flexibility, capital intensity and adaptability, and short-term reliability versus long-term resilience.

In the context of small populations, geographic dispersion and constrained fiscal space, these choices carry heightened consequences. Infrastructure systems often serve entire national populations and lock countries into long-lived development pathways.

In the energy sector, this debate is most visible in efforts to transition away from imported fossil fuels towards low- or zero-emissions systems without compromising affordability or reliability. Sustainable energy is increasingly recognised as a viable development option that strengthens the resilience of island communities (Prasad et al., 2025a), but energy systems themselves must also be resilient to climatic and economic shocks (ARUP, 2019).

Infrastructure systems often serve entire national populations and lock countries into long-lived development pathways.

Building new energy systems is relatively more expensive for SIDS than for larger states. Advanced technologies are typically imported, sunk costs are spread across small consumer bases, and financing is often subject to higher interest rates. These costs are compounded by the need to replace existing fossil fuel systems that themselves represent disproportionate past investments.

Consequently, while renewable energy carries substantial long-term benefits of enhanced energy security, reduced exposure to fuel price volatility, lower operating costs and emissions mitigation, the short-term costs of implementation can be daunting for fiscally constrained governments.

A key feature of some renewable energy systems is their intermittency, which calls for energy storage systems. Individual residential storage remains a primary focus for rural electrification and resilience, but community energy storage (CES) systems can play a significant role too in transforming local communities from consumers to ‘prosumers’ and ‘nonsumers’ (Koirala et al., 2019). Unlike fragmented household-level batteries, CES offer superior economies of scale and enhanced grid stability for microgrids. The transition to such decentralised models is currently hindered by several factors though. This includes lack of clear legal frameworks regarding ‘prosumer’ rights and community-owned assets, difficulty securing financing, and challenges in integrating shared storage with existing ageing distribution lines and in managing load-sharing protocols among diverse households.

SIDS’ overall electricity generation portfolio is still dominated by non-renewable sources and it requires substantial transformation (Figure 4.1). But SIDS have made notable progress in expanding renewable electricity generation over the past decade: installed renewable capacity grew at a compound annual rate of 8.5% between 2016 and 2021, increasing from 3.5 gigawatts (GW) in 2014 to nearly 6GW in 2020, largely driven by solar power (UNDP, 2024a).

Several countries have experienced particularly rapid growth. The Dominican Republic increased its wind capacity fivefold, from 80 megawatts (MW) to 417MW, while its solar capacity expanded seventy-one-fold to 1,077MW – the highest among SIDS. Barbados increased installed solar capacity from 1MW to 69MW over the same period (Havea et al., 2024). Even Trinidad and Tobago, one of the few SIDS with significant but declining fossil fuel resources and an advanced downstream petrochemical sector, commissioned the 92MW Brechin Castle Solar Farm in mid-2025 and has announced long-term plans to develop up to 57GW of offshore wind capacity by 2065 to support green hydrogen production.

Renewable generation offers lower operating costs than fossil fuels because it avoids ongoing fuel and transport expenses

(Boodoo, 2025; Rogers et al., 2019). This creates a significant opportunity for fossil fuel-dependent SIDS to reduce exposure to external price shocks and diversify their energy mix using Indigenous resources (Havea et al., 2024). Realising this opportunity depends on countries overcoming high upfront investment costs and addressing system-level challenges related to intermittency, storage and grid stability though.

This highlights the centralised versus decentralised dilemma, and the persistent divide between proponents of utility-scale solutions and advocates of community-based systems.

Centralised, utility-scale renewable projects and national grids can benefit from economies of scale, standardised regulation and coordinated system management.



Wind Farm, Victoria, Mahe Island, the Seychelles. Photo: ByDroneVideos/ Shutterstock.com.

But in SIDS these projects and grids also concentrate risk, increase vulnerability to single-point failures, and require substantial capital outlays that are difficult to reverse once committed.

In contrast, decentralised renewable energy systems (e.g. off-grid solar, wind installations and mini-grids with battery storage) can provide reliable electricity to remote communities, reduce exposure to system-wide disruptions and support local resilience. But they incur system costs attached to storage technologies ([Boodoo, 2025](#)) and they introduce additional challenges around the disposal and recycling of expired batteries and other electronic waste ([Wosnick et al., 2024](#)).

Geographic variation further shapes these choices. Caribbean SIDS generally operate larger, more consolidated grids, whereas the dispersed populations of many Pacific islands make centralised grids technically or financially impractical. Instead, Pacific governments have explored off-grid and hybrid options. Fiji, for example, combines micro-hydro systems and solar PV mini grids with battery storage and diesel backup to ensure reliability, particularly during cyclone seasons ([Prasad, 2025](#); [UNDP Pacific Office, 2025](#)). Increasing renewable penetration across both centralised and decentralised systems has also heightened the importance of grid-scale storage solutions, such as pumped hydropower, where feasible.

There are similar trade-offs in the water sector. Large-scale infrastructure, including desalination plants and piped distribution networks, can deliver reliable and scalable water supplies for urban centres but it involves high capital, maintenance and

energy costs. There are also concerns regarding long-term sustainability and carbon footprints.

On the other hand, smaller, decentralised hydro systems such as rainwater harvesting, household storage tanks and community-managed treatment plants are often more adaptable and culturally embedded, but there are challenges around water quality control, financing and long-term maintenance. Climate-related pressures like drought, heavy rainfall, saltwater intrusion and agricultural runoff complicate planning and increase stress on both system types ([Quon and Jiang, 2023](#)).

Across energy and water sectors, these tensions underscore a shared strategic challenge for SIDS: how to design infrastructure systems that balance reliability and efficiency with flexibility and resilience under conditions of climatic uncertainty and fiscal constraint.

Choices between centralised and decentralised approaches are rarely binary – in practice, hybrid configurations are increasingly adopted. However, the consequences of these choices are magnified in SIDS contexts, where infrastructure investments shape development trajectories for decades and mistakes are costly to undo.

And these debates extend beyond individual sectors to broader questions of infrastructure resilience. Early approaches emphasised the capacity of assets to resist hazards through stronger design, advanced materials and technological innovation. More recent perspectives define resilience as the ability of infrastructure systems to absorb,

respond to and recover from shocks across asset, service and user levels ([Hallegatte et al., 2019](#)).

For SIDS, where average annual disaster losses reach 2.1% of GDP and exposure is concentrated in low-elevation coastal zones, the challenge lies in balancing high per-unit investment costs with urgent adaptation needs. How governments navigate the centralised versus decentralised trade-off can therefore shape the resilience, affordability and sustainability of future infrastructure systems.

4.1.5 Infrastructure resilience: essential for climate adaptation

Infrastructure consistently ranks among the highest adaptation priorities in SIDS – alongside livelihoods and well-being and water security ([Dupar and Lindsay, 2025](#)). Adaptation measures are typically cross-sectoral, linking engineered structures with coastal protection, water systems and energy grids. A review of SIDS' adaptation plans identified a common set of actions: constructing desalination plants, 'hard' infrastructure like sea walls, 'soft' infrastructure like nature-based or hybrid green-grey infrastructure, and renewable-powered systems ([Robinson and Gilfillan, 2017](#)).

Types of interventions to improve infrastructure include retrofitting high-risk infrastructure, updating building codes to reflect climate risks, strengthening land-use planning, conducting vulnerability assessments, and integrating nature-based solutions (NbS) such as mangrove restoration. But, while a mix of social,

institutional and physical adaptation measures are being taken, gaps remain – particularly in stakeholder capacity-building and in the integration of early warning systems (EWS) for infrastructure resilience.

For example, few countries explicitly include actions to enhance inter-island connectivity and to link their economies to regional markets and global supply chains, despite their importance for trade and disaster preparedness. Climate-proofing airports, ports and other transport hubs will be essential as well, to ensure both economic security and rapid post-disaster recovery. Strengthening these areas, alongside investing in technical upgrades, will help ensure that infrastructure resilience is embedded structurally, and also socially and institutionally.

Adaptation in transportation raises similar dilemmas to infrastructure more broadly. Mobility is both a connectivity and a resilience issue, given how closely transport systems intersect with trade, tourism, energy security and disaster response. Transportation debates in SIDS traditionally centre on climate resilience, market access, migration, and technical and financial viability, but these debates are shaped by energy insecurity, tariff barriers and the vulnerabilities associated with remoteness, small-scale economies, and dependence on tourism and a limited set of primary commodities ([ADB, 2020](#); [Dyer, 2024](#)).

One set of debates focuses on whether to expand existing capacity through major port and airport upgrades (including developments in Fiji, Nauru, Tonga and Jamaica's Kingston Freeport

terminal) to support transshipment and regional mobility. These hubs are critical infrastructure and require reliable energy, water, fuel and increasingly internet connectivity too. However, such projects raise concerns about growth pressures on communities and infrastructure, long-term financial and environmental sustainability, and geopolitical dependency on external partners. And these risks are amplified by pandemic, climate and global disruption.

Other stakeholders highlight innovation-led pathways, including decarbonising maritime transport, reviving railways, supporting blue economy entrepreneurship and promoting greater local value-adding (such as through biofuels). Indigenous maritime initiatives, for instance those from the Micronesian Centre for Sustainable Transport and the Pacific Voyaging Society, also demonstrate alternative models ([Nuttall et al., 2021](#)).

A related debate concerns the potential for expanded regional cooperation on various issues from a Caribbean regional ferry service to Pacific smart-shipping initiatives, centralised logistics partnerships (e.g., Fiji Airways), and collaborative training and research through regional universities and maritime institutions ([Arvis et al., 2023](#); [CPCS Transcom International and Hamilton, 2018](#); [World Bank, 2023](#)). Such cooperation offers gains in scale, cost efficiency, knowledge exchange and resilience, which would help address vulnerabilities linked to tariffs, supply chain disruptions, pandemics, climate impacts and geopolitical risks.

4.1.6 Governance, finance and digital capacity: large-scale investment versus incremental change

Debates around governance, finance and digital capacity in SIDS centre on how governments should prioritise high-cost resilience investments versus incremental, adaptive measures that better align with limited fiscal and institutional resources. This question is especially pressing where technological options are evolving quickly and where digital connectivity and regulatory capabilities vary widely across islands.

SIDS need to shift quickly to new technologies for greater resilience and to drive adaptation in a context where obsolescence is a real concern. Yet mistakes entail higher and more numerous costs, because the sunk capital is relatively greater than in other states with larger populations and more fiscal space. Major infrastructural systems are more expensive to deliver and finance, and – because they generally serve entire small populations rather than one region or city – they cannot easily be uprooted. They therefore also require additional funding once an outsized investment has been sunk into them.

Put differently: SIDS cannot afford to make the wrong choices when building new windfarms or energy grids, for example, because they must live with those choices and cannot write them off and start again ([Bishop et al., 2023](#)).

Many SIDS are planning to decarbonise the transport sector through e-mobility ([KPMG, 2022](#)). Here, smart charging can improve grid load factors ([Maia et al., 2024](#)) and end-use efficiency measures can reduce capital investment needs while generating social

benefits. Digitalisation can enhance these gains (IEA, 2024), but unreliable internet access in outer islands limits their reach.

These differences highlight the need to plan energy transitions in ways that recognise wide disparities across SIDS. Some, like Mauritius and Tuvalu, have near-universal electricity access; others, including Haiti and the Solomon Islands, remain below 50% (Bundhoo et al., 2018). Such variations feed into broader debates over how to sequence and resource energy and transport transitions when countries have very different baseline conditions.

Financing constraints deepen these dilemmas, particularly in clean energy transitions which require coordinated investment in planning, installation, capacity-building and monitoring (Mohan, 2022).

The World Bank's support for Haiti's Off-Grid Electrification Fund, for example, has enabled private mini-grid developers to equip 300 households with solar PV systems, with plans for an additional 4,700 installations (Alliance for Rural Electrification, 2022). Support for battery storage in Belize and geothermal exploration in Dominica and St. Lucia illustrate the importance of concessional finance in unlocking options that would otherwise be out of reach. Yet high upfront costs, small markets and limited fiscal space constrain implementation, meaning that even well-designed projects may not scale without sustained external support (Lucas et al., 2017). These pressures are compounded by volatile oil prices, rapid technological change in battery storage and the unpredictable availability of climate finance (Khayat, 2025; Mohan, 2022).



Filming Climate Blueprint, solar panels in Barbados, 2025. Photo: RESI/Ben Merker, Merk Films.

Should scarce resources be directed towards high-cost, stringent resilience standards or towards incremental measures that better match existing administrative and fiscal capacities?

These challenges reflect broader constraints in adaptation financing. Multilateral climate finance systems are often fragmented and administratively burdensome, with narrow donor priorities and a persistent emphasis on post-disaster recovery over long-term resilience. Extensive application requirements also overwhelm limited national capacity in many SIDS. Combined with competing national priorities (e.g. poverty reduction, healthcare and crime prevention), these financing constraints shape a core strategic dilemma for SIDS: should scarce resources be directed towards high-cost, stringent resilience standards or towards incremental measures that better match existing administrative and fiscal capacities?

As global economic activity becomes more digital, SIDS then face pressure to build regulatory capacity for digital trade. Digital Economy Agreements (DEAs) are one mechanism to support capacity-building and establish shared rules and standards (Bajaj, 2022). Yet many SIDS lack the technology, infrastructure and institutional skills to implement these agreements effectively, limiting their ability to govern digital markets, to ensure consumer confidence and to compete internationally (Bajaj, 2022). And this reinforces wider concerns about whether SIDS can meaningfully integrate into global

value chains through virtual channels when connectivity gaps and digital skills shortages remain significant.

A further governance debate is playing out around how SIDS can balance investments in physical connectivity in infrastructure such as ports, shipping and airports with investments in digital systems such as fibre-optic cables, satellite connectivity and fintech platforms. Both are needed to reduce isolation and enhance resilience, but limited financial resources require difficult trade-offs. These decisions determine the extent to which SIDS can diversify their economies, improve service delivery and engage with emerging digital markets.

Taken together, these debates highlight the structural pressures shaping governance and financing choices in SIDS. Governments must continuously balance ambition with feasibility while navigating high expectations for resilience and digital transformation – and all within fiscal, institutional and connectivity constraints.

4.2 Recent trends and contributions

SIDS are operationalising resilience across key systems but enabling conditions for replication, durability and scaling are still weak.

In systems transitions in energy, there is evidence of technical feasibility in renewable generation, storage, microgrids and efficiency initiatives; however, SIDS face challenges around integration, costs and institutional capacity.

Recent developments across SIDS in water security and infrastructure resilience show uneven progress in the application of monitoring tools, standards, digital technologies and NbS solutions. Meanwhile, innovations in transport, digital connectivity and market integration are increasingly shaped by low-carbon transport pilots, regional cooperation and digitally enabled approaches to overcoming remoteness and scale.

4.2.1 Systems transitions in energy

Diverse experiments and pilots are underway across SIDS as countries seek to expand renewable energy supply and reduce their dependence on imported fuels. Collectively, these studies show how islands are adapting technologies to local conditions, while also identifying cost, technical and capacity barriers.

Floating solar PV systems are one emerging option for electricity supply. In Tuvalu, the installed system can generate 174.2 megawatt hours (MWh) of electricity annually with corresponding cost-savings in diesel (UNDP, 2023). Kiribati is planning to install a similar system (ADB, 2025). In the clean cooking sector, some islands are adopting biogas stoves to address the low clean cooking energy access rate (Prasad et al., 2025b and 2025c). These stoves not only provide clean energy, they also help manage organic waste and promote organic farming.

Microgrids remain a critical area of innovation for powering small islands and remote communities. They can use different energy sources and are increasingly relevant in both rural and urban settings, although battery storage costs pose challenges. As more

variable renewable energy is integrated into central grids, storage systems become essential for maintaining reliability. Recent innovations here include a geographic information system-based (GIS) model identifying potential sites for seawater pumped storage hydropower systems on Curaçao (Pradhan et al., 2021), a technology not yet widely deployed in SIDS. Research has also modelled optimal renewable energy and storage configurations for Antigua and Barbuda, estimating a levelised cost of energy of US\$0.083 per kilowatt hour (kWh) (Hoody et al., 2023), comparable to the International Renewable Energy Agency's (IRENA) estimate of US\$0.10/kWh. Energy planning studies for Mauritius (Jaggeshar et al., 2025), Fiji and other SIDS similarly explore feasible low-carbon transition pathways. Additional work assesses the potential of waste-to-energy technologies to increase renewable energy shares (Mata-Lima et al., 2021).

Energy efficiency remains underutilised across SIDS, however. Shah et al. (2021) recommend a four-pronged approach of initiation, incentivisation, information and investment to unlock its benefits. Capacity-building is also foundational to sustaining clean energy transitions, with support needed to strengthen understanding of technologies, to develop skills for grant writing and project management, and to build capabilities for system operation and monitoring.

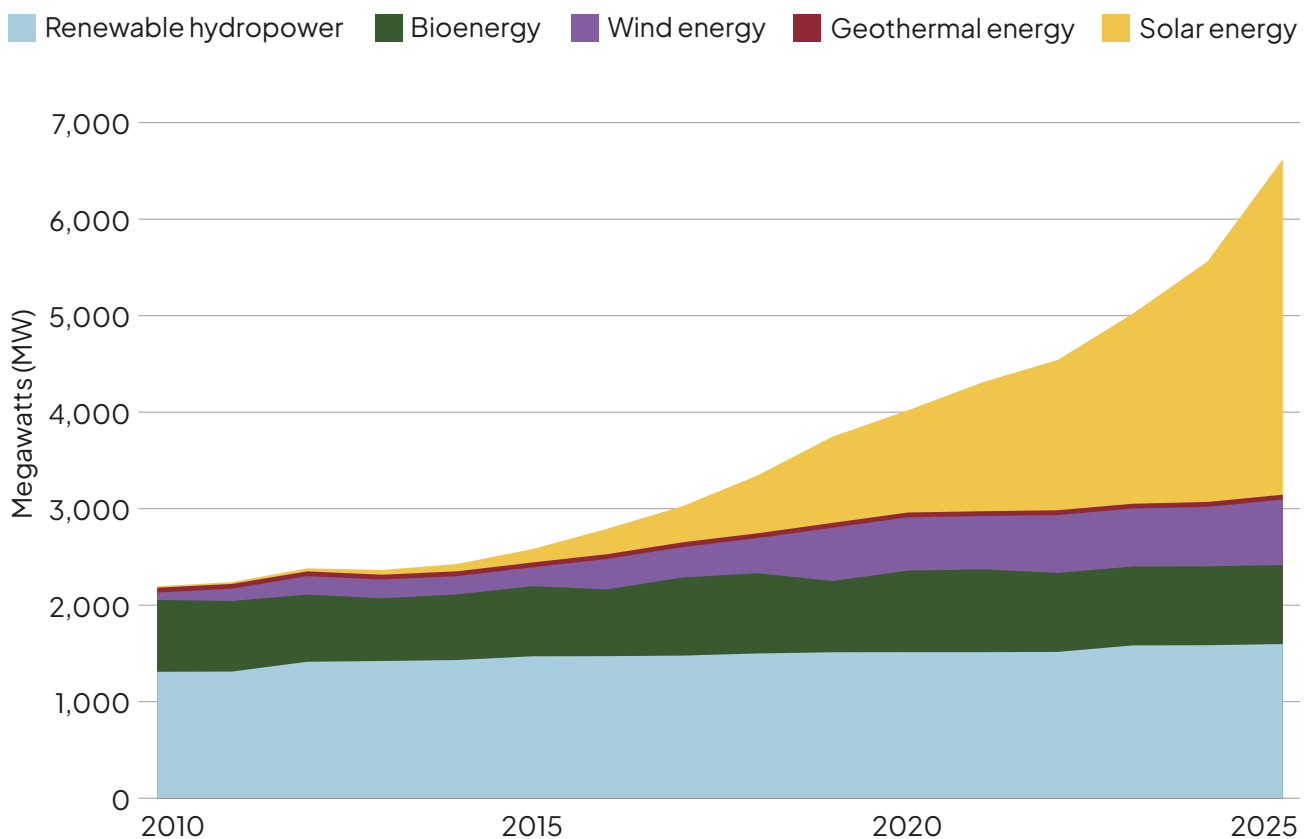
Recent IRENA data show continued growth in renewable energy installations in SIDS – solar is the most prominent source, followed by wind and bioenergy (Figure 4.3). Though research also notes the need for better understanding of how climate change may affect locally available renewable resources

and of how to maintain a diverse, efficient and cost-effective supply. Geothermal resources exist in some SIDS, but uptake is limited by high upfront costs and lack of technical expertise (Bhagaloo et al., 2022).

Energy transitions in SIDS are no longer primarily constrained by technological feasibility, but by the conditions under which systems are planned, financed and operated.

Overall, these examples show that energy transitions in SIDS are no longer primarily constrained by technological feasibility, but by the conditions under which systems are planned, financed and operated. Renewable generation, storage and decentralised solutions are technically viable across settings, yet performance and durability vary widely depending on institutional capacity, system design choices and long-term management arrangements. SIDS must focus more on the practical requirements for sustaining and scaling energy systems over time.

Figure 4.3 Installed renewable energy capacity, all SIDS 2010–2025



Source: IRENA (n.d.) IRENASTAT Online Data Query Tool, (https://pxweb.irena.org/pxweb/en/IRENASTAT/IRENASTAT__Power%20Capacity%20and%20Generation/) and IRENA (2023).

4.2.2 Water security and infrastructure resilience

Important advances have been made in monitoring, standards development and digital tools across SIDS. Place-based groundwater surveys are improving understanding of aquifer dynamics; new wastewater reuse standards are gaining policy traction; and emerging digital practices such as non-revenue water analytics offer scalable tools for managing water efficiency. However, most studies remain single-island and short-term. There has been little long-term monitoring and transferability remains uncertain across diverse hydro-geological and governance contexts.

From a policy perspective, these research contributions are highly relevant though. Groundwater analyses are informing Caribbean aquifer protection strategies and conjunctive use planning; reuse standards are guiding pilots for non-potable applications and risk communication; and regional data hubs are helping to reduce duplication and enable government ministries to prioritise investments across islands.

For further progress to be made, there is a need for sustained investment, comparative frameworks and multistakeholder approaches to water governance. Table 4.1 summarises focus areas across the SIDS regions, highlighting recent examples of research and practice.

Table 4.1 Regional focus and emerging contributions

Region	Focus area	Recent examples	Main takeaway
Pacific atolls	Groundwater mapping and resilience	Pacific Community ‘Groundwater and Pacific Resilience’ (SPC, 2024)	Aquifers offer shock-resilient supply if monitored and governed
Pacific islands	Traditional knowledge integration	2024 Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP)/WIREs (Columbie, 2022)	Traditional knowledge plus science boosts adoption and fit of measures
Caribbean	Wastewater reuse and standards	Trinidad and Tobago national voluntary standard for wastewater reuse; knowledge, attitudes and practice (KAP) and willingness-to-pay (WTP) results (Roopnarine et al., 2023)	High willingness to pay; pricing and safety messaging are key
Cross-regional	Digital water tools	2025 artificial intelligence (AI)/digital twin trend reports (UNDP, 2024a and 2024b)	Non-revenue water, energy and forecasting gains for small utilities

Source: Adapted from Nunn (2024).

A parallel evolution is underway in infrastructure resilience, where recent work looks beyond traditional engineering fixes towards diversified and context-specific strategies.

Caribbean research points to a persistent preference for ‘grey’ infrastructure, shaped by colonial legacies, financing incentives and tourism aesthetics that often have limited adoption of NbS ([Douglas and Lohrer, 2024](#)). Therefore, stronger evidence and incentives are needed to mainstream ecosystem-based approaches.

Progress has been made in developing SIDS-specific design codes though. Regional initiatives such as the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure ([CDRI, 2025](#)) are creating modular, hazard-appropriate standards that integrate vernacular practices, NbS and locally available materials. In Haiti, the Ministry of Public Works and Build Change are revising the National Building Code to incorporate hurricane-resilient specifications, retrofitting standards and broader coverage of rural and timber-frame housing ([Zari et al., 2019](#); [Allam and Jones, 2019](#)).

In the Pacific, recent pilot projects show the value of community-led innovation. For instance, in the Province des Îles Loyauté, locally built coastal defences using wood and pruning waste have proven cost-efficient, and they have strengthened shoreline protection and empowered communities to replicate solutions. These initiatives also deliver co-benefits such as habitat restoration and greater safety for coastal settlements ([Green Cross France and Territories, 2023](#)).

Taken together, these contributions show a shift towards diversified, context-specific resilience strategies that combine

engineering research, updated design codes and community-driven innovation. Crucially, they highlight the importance of producing actionable knowledge for policy-makers, planners and finance ministers, so that resilience research translates into tangible protection and long-term savings for SIDS.

4.2.3 Transport and market connectivity

There is evidence of growing experimentation in transport and market connectivity across SIDS as governments and partners seek to strengthen mobility, reduce emissions and overcome constraints of scale and remoteness. Rather than isolated initiatives, the literature points to an expanding set of technological trials, policy efforts and regional collaborations that together signal emerging pathways for more resilient and connected island systems.

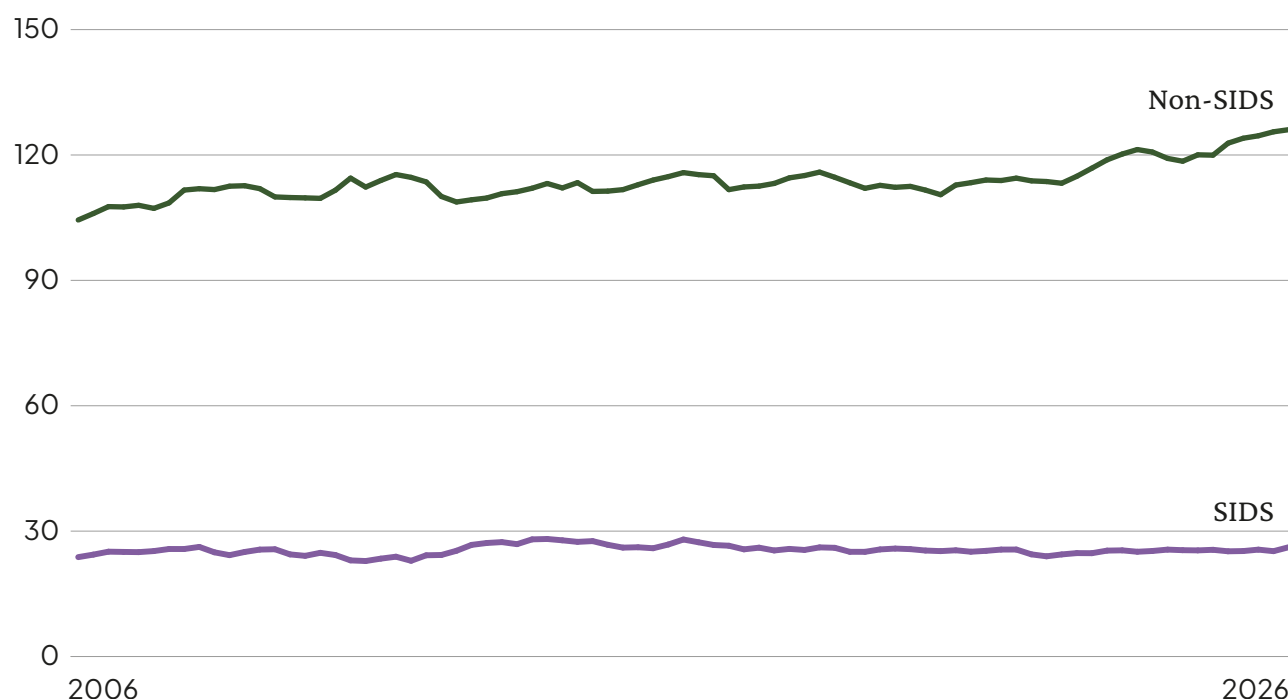
In maritime and air transport, test projects demonstrate how low-carbon technologies can reshape inter-island mobility. Swire Shipping’s research on biofuels and decarbonised shipping ([Nuttall et al., 2021](#)), Fiji’s solar-electric ferry project and the Caribbean Tourism Organization’s work on inter-regional air connectivity illustrate growing interest in cleaner, more efficient services, with results expected soon. Additional trials such as Norden’s 2025 biofuel shipment to Réunion and hydrogen fuel applications for inter-island vessels show steps towards reducing fuel insecurity and emissions. In remote settings, innovations such as 5G-enabled drones delivering vaccines in settings as diverse as islands in Vanuatu and Orkney show how autonomous systems can overcome infrastructure and skills gaps.

These advances have spurred greater attention from shipping researchers, the International Maritime Organization, civil aviation authorities and SIDS-led coalitions (including the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS), the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (SPC)). Their work focuses on cost, emissions, safety, fuel security, skills and the potential benefits of enhanced regional cooperation, including public-private partnerships.

Yet challenges to progress remain, namely dependence on external funders and

operators, limited existing routes (especially in the Pacific and Indian Ocean) and concentrated market structures (e.g., Fiji Airways' dominance in the South Pacific). The Liner shipping connectivity index, for example, shows how SIDS' accessibility to global trade through shipping networks is significantly lower than for other countries (Figure 4.4). Additionally, regional variations shape priorities, with Pacific research centred on long-distance sea logistics for dispersed islands, while Caribbean studies focus on hub-and-spoke models for airlines and the proposed Connect Caribe ferry service. Indian Ocean research highlights potential for cruise and ferry-based tourism.

Figure 4.4 Liner shipping connectivity index, 2006–2026



Note: Excluding four big hubs of the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Mauritius and Singapore, versus global average.

Source: UNCTAD (2026) Liner shipping connectivity index (<https://unctadstat.unctad.org/datacentre/dataviewer/US.LSCI>)

Transport innovation intersects with a broader agenda on market connectivity. Internet use in SIDS has grown by 8.4% annually since 2014, with 67% of the population now online (ITU, 2024). But there are still gaps in mobile broadband reach, rural 4G access and digital skills. Affordability barriers and little locally relevant content also constrain uptake, evidenced by the 18% of people with internet access who do not use it. These findings underscore the need for both infrastructure investment and user-focused digital inclusion strategies.

Recent infrastructure investments are helping to close digital connectivity gaps across SIDS regions. In the Pacific, World Bank-funded projects under the Pacific Regional Connectivity Programme have delivered undersea fibre-optic cables to Tonga, Samoa, Fiji and the Federated States of Micronesia (World Bank, 2016). In Kiribati, improvements to satellite internet and the East Micronesia Cable System are expected to significantly expand access to education, health and government services, supporting broader engagement in regional and global economies (Frackiewicz, 2025). In the Caribbean, the CELIA submarine cable (a consortium project backed by EU funding) will connect Aruba, Martinique, Antigua and Puerto Rico when it goes live in 2027 (Submarine Cable Network, n.d.). The Coral Sea Cable System, majority-funded by Australia, has similarly improved connectivity for Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands (Coral Sea Cable Company, n.d.). Alongside physical infrastructure, emerging digital transformation initiatives, such as Papua New Guinea's Digital FDI Working Group (World Economic Forum, 2020), are supporting broader economic integration.

These developments align with the ABAS, which emphasises digital cooperation, enabling regulatory environments, capacity-building and inclusive innovation. Taken together, recent contributions show how transport decarbonisation, regional mobility initiatives and improved digital infrastructure can help SIDS address long-standing connectivity constraints, while also highlighting the policy and investment gaps that must be bridged to ensure these innovations translate into inclusive economic growth.

4.3 Evidence and knowledge gaps

There is growing ambition, innovation and investment across energy, water, infrastructure, transportation and market connectivity in SIDS. However, significant knowledge gaps continue to constrain islands' ability to design, sequence and scale resilience-enhancing interventions effectively. These gaps matter not simply because data are incomplete, but because uncertainty in small, highly exposed economies magnifies risks of mistargeted investments, poorly designed infrastructure, regulatory lock-in and missed opportunities for innovation.

Gaps matter not simply because data are incomplete, but because uncertainty in small, highly exposed economies magnifies risks.

With limited fiscal buffers and high exposure to climate and external economic shocks, SIDS face disproportionate costs when decisions are made under conditions

of weak evidence. Gaps are organised thematically here to highlight where improved knowledge will most directly strengthen policy design, investment choices and long-term resilience outcomes.

4.3.1 Energy systems, storage and integration

Ambitious renewable energy targets have been set and recent progress has been made in deployment. But there is limited island-specific data on renewable resource availability, storage requirements, grid stability and optimal system configurations under varying climatic and demand conditions. While battery and renewable technology costs are declining globally, there is insufficient empirical evidence on how these technologies perform at the scale, geographic dispersion and exposure levels typical of SIDS. As a result, decisions regarding grid architecture, storage sizing and backup capacity are often made using models calibrated for much larger systems. This increases the risk of over- or under-investment (Lucas et al., 2017).

Analytical gaps in system integration also pose risks. For example, a rapid shift towards transport electrification powered by fossil fuel-dominated electricity grids could increase emissions rather than reduce them (Shah, 2022). Similarly, limited understanding of how climate change may affect renewable resource profiles over time complicates long-term planning.

Institutional fragmentation further constrains progress, as energy planning, transport policy, waste management and digital systems are often developed in silos. Strengthening collaboration between

public institutions, private developers and local operators – particularly to ensure skills transfer and long-term system operation – remains an underdeveloped area of practice (Prasad and Raturi, 2025).

4.3.2 Water resources, hydrological risk and decision-making under uncertainty

Projected changes in water availability across SIDS under current population growth and water-use trajectories show widening disparities and heightened stress in several island contexts.



Desalination plant, Kiribati, 2023.
Photo: RESI/Emily Wilkinson.

In water resource management, technological options such as desalination, wastewater reuse, rainwater harvesting and digital monitoring systems are increasingly available. Their long-term performance, sustainability and governance integration in SIDS remain poorly understood though. Large infrastructure investments are frequently made under conditions of uncertainty regarding future rainfall patterns, aquifer recharge rates, ecosystem impacts and energy requirements. These uncertainties are compounded by limited hydrogeological data in many islands and by weak institutional capacity for long-term monitoring and adaptive management ([Dookie, 2024](#)).

Remote sensing and citizen science offer promising pathways to expand data coverage.

Knowledge gaps are particularly acute in understanding how combined climate stressors – drought, extreme rainfall, saltwater intrusion and land-use change – interact to affect water availability and quality. While remote sensing and citizen science offer promising pathways to expand data coverage, their systematic integration into national water planning remains limited. Addressing these gaps will require coordinated regional and international support, including detailed hydrogeological surveys, training of local technicians and stronger mechanisms to translate scientific information into operational decision-making ([UNESCO IHP, 2016](#); [Thomas and Benjamin, 2018](#)).

4.3.3 Infrastructure resilience, AI and risk forecasting

Infrastructure resilience is constrained by limited localised climate-risk modelling and insufficient use of digital and AI-enabled forecasting tools, particularly in data-scarce island environments.

Although advances in AI have significantly improved flood forecasting accuracy through hybrid convolutional neural networks and long short-term memory (CNN-LSTM) and geospatial models, their application in SIDS is hindered by sparse sensor networks, weak telemetry and fragmented data governance arrangements ([Addison et al., 2025](#)). Consequently, many infrastructure systems still rely on reactive rather than anticipatory risk management approaches.

Hybrid solutions combining satellite data, meteorological inputs and community-based reporting show promise for overcoming these barriers, but they are underexplored and underfunded. There are gaps, too, in integrating traditional and scientific knowledge systems. SIDS possess rich Indigenous practices for environmental monitoring and risk management, and these need to be better incorporated in formal planning processes with clear frameworks for data ownership and collaboration ([Hernández-Delgado, 2024](#); [Dookie et al., 2023](#)). Bridging these divides is essential if AI and digital tools are to complement, rather than displace, locally grounded resilience strategies.

4.3.4 Transport systems, logistics and autonomous technologies

In the transport sector, knowledge gaps extend across logistics performance, inter-island connectivity, and the resilience of humanitarian and commercial supply chains. Existing indices and datasets often lack the granularity needed to inform policy in SIDS contexts, providing limited insight into average shipping times, reliability and cost structures specific to these island nations ([World Bank, 2023](#); [Dyer, 2024](#)). Very few studies systematically assess smart or green shipping, climate-resilient ports and airports, or the potential role of autonomous and AI-enabled systems in reducing connectivity constraints.

Emerging technologies such as electric ferries, autonomous vessels, drones and smart ports offer potential efficiency and resilience gains, particularly for remote and low-population islands. But more research and evidence is needed on their economic viability, regulatory implications, labour impacts and safety in SIDS contexts to avoid regulatory uncertainty or inappropriate lock-in ([Shah and Kelman, 2025](#)).

4.3.5 Digital connectivity and market integration

Finally, significant gaps also persist in understanding how SIDS can effectively leverage digital connectivity to enhance market access and economic diversification.

Physical infrastructure investments in fibre-optic cables and satellite connectivity are expanding, but less is known about the regulatory, institutional and human-capital barriers that prevent small firms and

entrepreneurs from fully participating in digital trade. Issues related to online payment systems, cybersecurity frameworks, digital literacy and data governance need further research, particularly for smaller and more remote islands. Existing trade and logistics indices are often too aggregated to capture the specific constraints faced by SIDS. This limits their usefulness for policy design ([World Bank, 2023](#)).

Addressing these gaps would enable policy-makers to identify targeted regulatory reforms and investment priorities that yield high returns relative to cost, while at the same time supporting more inclusive participation in regional and global markets.

4.4 Looking ahead

Knowledge gaps demand immediate action, but equally important is anticipating how global and regional shifts will shape the trajectory of resilience in SIDS over the next decade.

In the energy sector, future trends point to both unprecedented opportunities and persistent structural challenges. Given the current trajectory of renewable energy adoption in SIDS, IRENA anticipates that installed renewable capacity could reach 10GW by 2030, up from 7.6GW in 2022, at an estimated cost of US\$10 billion ([Payton, 2025](#)).

Several trends are poised to shape this transition. The most significant is the continued steep decline in the costs of solar, wind and battery technology. These have outpaced expectations, with projected costs being achieved 10–15 years earlier

than models predicted (Vatankhah Ghadim et al., 2025). Policy-makers, funders, project developers and other stakeholders should note this lesson – technology transfer could provide a powerful lever for SIDS to accelerate decarbonisation and energy security.

However, declining technology costs do not automatically translate into proportional savings for SIDS. While operational costs for renewable energy systems may converge towards global averages, the relative burden of upfront and sunk capital costs remains significantly higher in small-island systems, where investments are spread across limited customer bases and constrained fiscal space (Adeoti et al., 2020). In contrast to larger economies, it is harder for SIDS to absorb cost overruns, retire underperforming assets or reconfigure systems once investments are locked in. As a result, technology cost reductions must be interpreted in light of system scale, financing conditions and long-term risk exposure, rather than be assumed to deliver uniform affordability gains across contexts.

But cost is only one part of the equation. The future of energy transitions will also be shaped by the quality of regulatory frameworks, the availability of technical expertise, the accessibility of financing, and the capacity of domestic institutions to adapt and innovate. These non-technical factors will determine whether falling technology costs can be translated into widespread, equitable and sustainable adoption across island nations.

Innovation in marine energy, such as wave and tidal power, could benefit SIDS with vast ocean territories, though these technologies

are still in early development. Meanwhile, geopolitically, the increasing focus of major emitters and donors on climate action may lead to more dedicated financing for SIDS' energy projects.

Similar dynamics exist for water, where the future will be shaped not only by technological innovation but also by governance choices and regional cooperation. Over the coming decades, Caribbean SIDS will experience a water future shaped by intensifying climate pressures and rapid technological change. New desalination systems and water recycling technologies are emerging that promise higher energy efficiency and lower costs. But sharing expertise, pooling resources and exploring mechanisms such as emergency water transfers or joint drought insurance schemes will be critical too.

Costly innovations may increase inequalities and leave poorer or more remote islands behind. To avoid this, SIDS governments and partners should actively participate in testing new technologies, in shaping equitable financing models and in incorporating climate adaptation into water management so that future gains are sustainable and inclusive (Table 4.2), (Peters, 2014; UNESCO, 2019; Haddeland et al., 2014).

Just as water security will increasingly depend on innovation and cooperation, the resilience of SIDS also hinges on how their physical infrastructure evolves to withstand mounting climate risks while serving diverse community needs. Looking ahead, several trends are shaping how infrastructure resilience will evolve in SIDS.

Table 4.2 Future trends in water resource management

Future trend	Explanation	Source
Performance-based service and financing	Shift to performance-driven service management, reducing leakage and improving customer satisfaction.	World Bank (2026)
Rainwater harvesting	Using household and community cisterns/tanks to reduce dependence on scarce surface water.	Brantley (2025)
Desalination technologies	Expanding energy-efficient desalination as a reliable freshwater source.	Carrington (2015)
Community participation and governance	Ensuring a greater role for local communities in ownership and decision-making, thereby boosting resilience.	Klöck (2024)
Climate change impacts	Rainfall declines, higher evapotranspiration, stress on aquifers and surface water.	ECLAC (2024)
Tourism-driven seasonal water demand	Severe shortages during the dry season worsened by high tourism demand.	Galaitis et al. (2024)

One important direction is the participatory design of NbS. The effectiveness of solutions is greatly enhanced when local and Indigenous communities are engaged in co-design and implementation. This ensures solutions are environmentally robust while also being socially and culturally appropriate (Hernández-Delgado, 2024). It builds community ownership and stewardship of natural assets, which is critical for long-term resilience.

SIDS’ resilience will rely on blending community-driven NbS, localised engineering standards and smart digital tools, supported by international finance and home-grown capacity.

Technological innovation will also play a central role. Advances in AI and predictive analytics are beginning to deliver context-sensitive solutions for SIDS. For example, the AI4SIDS platform piloted in Trinidad shows that, even under limited data conditions, hybrid AI models can forecast floods up to six hours in advance (Addison et al., 2025). Coupled with geospatial visualisation, community-sourced data and inclusive EWS, these tools can overcome challenges linked to fragmented data and weak communication networks. Together, these trends point to a future where SIDS’ resilience will rely on blending community-driven NbS, localised engineering standards and smart digital tools, supported by international finance and home-grown capacity.

A similar transformation is unfolding in transportation, where sustainability, innovation and resilience are central to future planning. Pressures from international regulatory bodies such as the International Maritime Organization and International Civil Aviation Organization, coupled with supply chain demands and consumer expectations, are driving SIDS towards more innovative and low-emission solutions that balance near-term costs with long-term competitiveness. In developing future transport systems, there is pressure to deliver more innovative sustainable solutions, including emissions and fuel reductions, and 100% renewable energy. This will carry short-term costs and low profit margins but offer long-term competitiveness – representing a sustainability dilemma for operators.

Yet even as energy, water and transportation systems evolve to become cleaner, smarter and more regionally integrated, the ability of SIDS to thrive will increasingly depend on how they connect to markets in a rapidly changing global economy. The ongoing digital revolution, driven by technologies like 5G/6G networks, low-earth-orbit satellites (e.g., Starlink), and potentially quantum communications, could virtually eliminate telecom isolation for even the smallest islands within the next decade or two. This would enable new forms of trade, such as digital services and remote work. But policy-makers must recognise it requires investment in digital education and entrepreneurship now to ensure SIDS can capitalise on these opportunities in the future.



Ajeltake, Majuro Atoll, the Marshall Islands. Photo: Pexels/Zhibin Chen.

In trade, the regionalisation of supply chains, accelerated by recent global disruptions, may benefit SIDS if larger neighbours invest in production and include SIDS as suppliers or logistics hubs. However, rising global protectionism could threaten SIDS' market access, underscoring the need for collective advocacy in international fora to keep trade routes open.

Cross-cutting priorities align with the ABAS.

1. First, hybrid and modular infrastructure systems should be prioritised that balance the reliability of centralised assets with the flexibility and resilience of decentralised solutions. This is particularly critical in the energy and water sectors, where single-point failures can generate cascading national impacts.
2. Second, institutional and regulatory capacity-building must be treated equally to physical investment. Durable resilience gains will not be made from falling technology costs and tools such as digital monitoring systems and AI-enabled forecasting alone – strong governance is essential too.
3. Third, connectivity investments spanning transport, digital infrastructure and market integration should be sequenced strategically. This way investments will support economic diversification and reduce exposure to external shocks, rather than reinforce dependence on narrow sectors or single routes.

Resilience cannot be achieved through isolated interventions or short-term efficiency gains. It demands integrated systems thinking, long-term planning under uncertainty and sustained international cooperation. New technologies, innovative financing and regional collaboration offer real opportunities, but they must be adapted to local contexts and be backed by strong domestic institutions.

Both the ABAS and the broader vision of the Resilient and Sustainable Islands Initiative (RESI)⁹ emphasise this approach. They recognise diversity while promoting shared learning, collective action and alignment between national priorities and global support.

New technologies, innovative financing and regional collaboration offer real opportunities, but they must be adapted to local contexts and be backed by strong domestic institutions.

Ultimately, energy, water, infrastructure, transport and market connectivity underpin a secure future for SIDS: their interdependence means progress in one area strengthens others. By investing in integrated systems, reinforcing institutions and aligning ambition with implementation capacity, SIDS can move beyond vulnerability towards more resilient, sustainable development. The priority now is to turn knowledge into sustained long-term action.

5. ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AND PLANETARY SUSTAINABILITY: REBALANCING NATURE–HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

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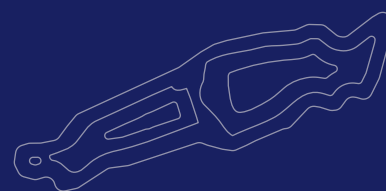
Summary

Climate change, oceans, biodiversity and disaster risk reduction (DRR) influence the resilience, vulnerability and development pathways of society and the economy in Small Island Developing States (SIDS). Opportunities exist, however, to rebalance the relationship between SIDS' populations and their natural environments, and between SIDS and the rest of the world.

SIDS are at the frontline of a triple planetary crisis – climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss – that threatens livelihoods, economies and cultural continuity ([IPCC, 2023](#); [UNEP, 2024](#)).

Alongside this vulnerability, SIDS are also custodians of vast ocean spaces, and can therefore be viewed as Large Ocean States too ([Saddington, 2023](#)). With Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) that, collectively, cover around 30% of the world's oceans, this area averages 28 times SIDS' combined landmass and encompasses precious marine ecosystems ([Chan, 2018](#)).

In this sense, SIDS are stewards of a vital global public good. Their ocean spaces form a crucial line of defence against the accelerating climate and biodiversity crises – a responsibility that is rarely fully acknowledged or adequately supported. Recognising this custodianship could open new narratives around sovereignty, stewardship and shared responsibility.



5.1 Key debates

SIDS face converging pressures. Rising sea levels, intensifying climate hazards, ecosystem degradation, pollution, water scarcity and displacement collectively erode SIDS' resilience and adaptive capacity. They threaten the ecosystems that underpin food security and cultural heritage.

Crucially, many of these pressures are generated externally. They are driven by global emissions, transboundary pollution and biodiversity loss that are beyond the control of SIDS. While domestic development choices and governance gaps can exacerbate these pressures, the primary sources of environmental harm that impact SIDS often originate outside their borders.

These ecological pressures are frequently framed as SIDS' sustainable development challenges, yet protecting and restoring island-nation coastal and marine ecosystems is essential for resilience globally.

The primary sources of environmental harm that impact SIDS often originate outside their borders.

Pacific SIDS are experiencing rising sea levels and intensifying cyclones that erode coastlines, damage infrastructure, increase water scarcity and displace communities. These impacts are deeply cultural too, threatening sacred sites, ancestral burial grounds and traditional knowledge systems (Tsegaye Gatiso et al., 2025). Coral reef degradation and species decline undermine food security and weaken ecosystem-based



The Maldives. Photo: Ishan @seefromthesky/Unsplash.

protections, while marine pollution adds cascading health and economic risks (Najeeb et al., 2025).

Caribbean SIDS are similarly vulnerable. Stronger hurricanes and rising seas devastate coastal infrastructure and tourism-dependent economies. Cultural heritage and community resilience are jeopardised as climate impacts intersect with socioeconomic fragilities, amplifying risks to food systems and livelihoods (IPCC, 2023).

And in the Atlantic, Indian Ocean and South China Sea (AIS) region, states such as the Seychelles, Mauritius, the Maldives and Comoros suffer coral bleaching, coastal erosion and rising seas that threaten densely populated coastlines. These states manage vast marine territories rich in biodiversity, yet they face the challenge of balancing economic resilience with ecosystem protection (Najeeb et al., 2025).

The Antigua and Barbuda Agenda for SIDS (ABAS) ([UN-OHRLLS, 2024](#)) recognises the urgency of the triple planetary crisis. It underscores the need for targeted and scaled-up responses – both within SIDS and from the international community – to address the most acute vulnerabilities. However, the ways in which these challenges and risks in SIDS should be addressed are not settled. Ongoing debates are shaped by competing priorities, governance gaps and power asymmetries within and beyond SIDS, often reflecting tensions between survival imperatives and global economic interests.

5.1.1 Climate action

Climate change debates concerning SIDS often reflect a mismatch between global and local priorities. International policy debates pursue the 1.5 °C target set out in the Paris Agreement ([UNFCCC, 2015](#)). But SIDS – which collectively contribute less than 1% of global emissions and only 0.5% of historic CO₂ emissions – emphasise adaptation concerns, consistently framing this as an existential issue due to their extreme vulnerability to sea-level rise, cyclones, droughts and ocean acidification ([Global Center on Adaptation, 2025](#)). SIDS do not consider there to be a trade-off between the two, instead stressing the need for adaptation to also be prioritised and adequately financed in a global system where mitigation dominates.

The financial burden of climate adaptation for SIDS is escalating. The United Nations Environment Programme's ([UNEP, 2025](#)) *Adaptation gap report 2025* estimates that developing countries will need more than US\$310 billion annually by 2035 for adaptation,

yet actual international adaptation finance stood at just US\$26 billion in 2023, having declined from the previous year.

Climate change debates concerning SIDS often reflect a mismatch between global and local priorities.

For SIDS specifically, adaptation needs amount to roughly US\$12 billion per year. They receive only 0.2% of global climate finance for adaptation, however, despite facing some of the highest per capita economic losses from climate-related disasters globally ([Saghir and Jorge, 2025](#); [Climate Policy Initiative, 2025](#)). This widening finance gap highlights the growing costs SIDS must absorb annually as climate impacts intensify, and it reinforces their call for adaptation to be treated as an urgent global priority.

Equity and capacity constraints also dominate climate change debates concerning SIDS ([OECD, 2023](#)). Despite their negligible contribution to global emissions, SIDS bear disproportionate impacts. Rightly so, they have been preoccupied with seeking support and compensation.

To this end, SIDS have been consistent moral leaders in international climate diplomacy. The Loss and Damage Fund created at the Conference of the Parties (COP28) in the United Arab Emirates in 2023 was a milestone, with SIDS playing a key leadership role. In principle, there is an agreement that SIDS will have preferential access to this Fund, in line with their special case ([UN News, 2025](#); [UNFCCC, 2023](#)).

In another important milestone, the 2025 International Court of Justice (ICJ) Advisory Opinion on state responsibility for climate change clarified that states must exercise due diligence, align emissions with the Paris Agreement and protect the marine environment (ICJ, 2025). This shifted climate action from moral appeal to legal obligation, and SIDS played a similarly critical leadership role in securing this landmark ruling for climate justice.

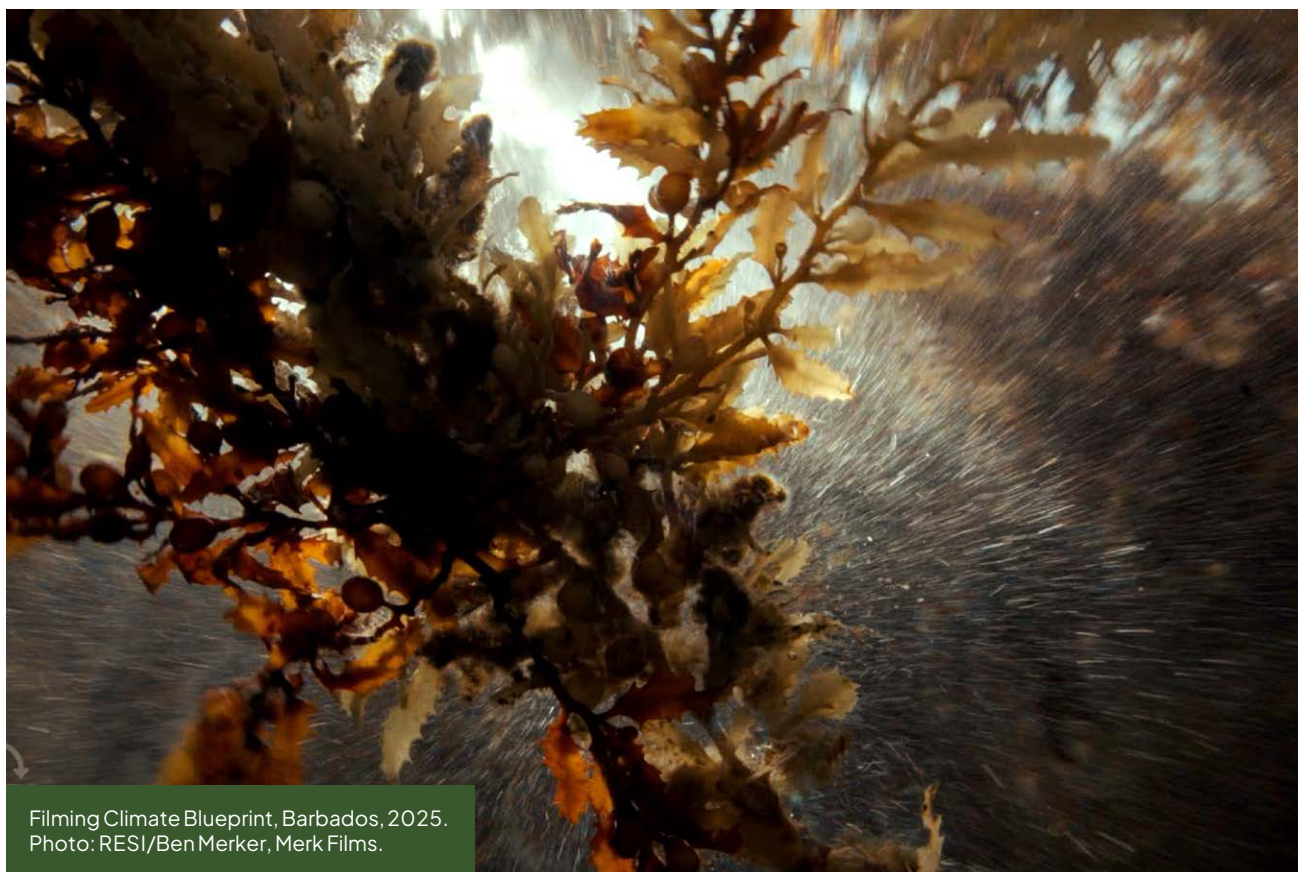
5.1.2 Ocean governance

Ocean governance debates span wide-ranging issues – from the stewardship of fisheries, to tackling marine pollution, the preservation of coastal and marine ecosystems and, more recently, deep-sea mining (DSM). Key challenges include power asymmetries between countries, the

trade-offs between economic development imperatives versus environmental concerns, and the right to exercise sovereignty.

SIDS have led many areas of ocean governance. For example, the Seychelles emerged as an early champion of marine spatial planning (MSP) among SIDS, using innovative ‘blue finance’ mechanisms such as debt-for-nature swaps and blue bonds to fund marine protection. Islands have also pushed for an ambitious global Plastics Treaty with production caps.

Other areas are challenging and more divisive though. For example, some Caribbean countries are struggling to balance marine tourism and fisheries with conservation under the Cartagena Convention and the Specially Protected Areas and Wildlife (SPAW) Protocol (UNEP-CEP, n.d.). This includes in Belize’s



Filming Climate Blueprint, Barbados, 2025.
Photo: RESI/Ben Merker, Merk Films.

Hol Chan Marine Reserve, where contested coastal development – such as dredging and proposed over-the-water construction at Cayo Rosario – and a sharp park-fee increase have triggered pushback from tour operators, guides and conservation groups (San Pedro Sun, 2024; Greater Belize Media, 2025). [This shows](#) how some states are finding it difficult to uphold SPAW's obligations to protect fragile ecosystems and regulate harmful activities, while also sustaining their tourism-based economies (SPAW RAC, n.d.)

Illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing is another challenge for many SIDS. With up to one in five fish caught globally estimated to come from IUU activity, harmful subsidies and regulatory gaps disproportionately affect island-nation economies (Yu and Liu, 2024). Although instruments such as the Port State Measures Agreement and Asia-Pacific Cooperation's (APEC) roadmap on IUU fishing are advancing, compliance is uneven among SIDS and larger states, leaving the ocean environment vulnerable despite formal commitments (FAO, 2025).

There are also divisions over DSM. Some Pacific SIDS have raised significant concerns, citing ecological uncertainty and cultural values. Several have declared moratoria (Cooper, 2025; Kasanawaqa et al., 2023).

DSM governance is increasingly fragmented, unfolding on two contradictory tracks. First, there is the multilateral process under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) led by the International Seabed Authority (ISA). And then there is the United States-led track via the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) under the Deep Seabed Hard Mineral Resources Act (DSHMRA). Here, permits

have been streamlined, prompting concerns about regulatory loopholes and unilateralism (Kasanawaqa et al., 2025; NOAA, 2026; White House, 2025).

This dual track raises the risk of regulatory arbitrage that sidelines many SIDS' precautionary positions. This is illustrated by Nauru's 2021 'two-year rule' trigger, which has pressured the ISA to consider exploitation applications even as rules remain unsettled. Meanwhile, the US-led approach could potentially fast-track activities outside UNCLOS processes. Together, such moves risk narrowing the space for SIDS to secure robust environmental safeguards and benefit-sharing at the multilateral table (Singh, 2022; White House, 2025; NOAA, 2026).

5.1.3 Climate and environmental pressures, impacts and justice

Coastal and marine ecosystems across SIDS have declined profoundly over time and are still exposed to significant pressures. For instance, Pacific atoll nations are witnessing significant shoreline erosion, coupled with saltwater contamination of vital freshwater lenses (Duvat et al., 2021). Across the Caribbean, recurrent marine heatwaves have triggered mass coral bleaching events, devastating reefs that are central to fisheries, tourism and coastal protection (Cetina-Heredia and Allende-Arandía, 2023). Meanwhile, mangrove forests are being cleared, particularly in densely populated deltas and urbanising coastlines, despite being critical buffers against storms.

The climate crisis is also manifesting in more prolonged and severe droughts. These are drying agricultural lands and threatening water security in nations such as Barbados,

Grenada, Kiribati and Tuvalu, where declining reservoir levels have triggered rationing in some communities (UNDRR, 2021).

Conversely, extreme rainfall events have caused floods and landslides, such as the 2023 disasters in Fiji, Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands that destroyed homes, roads and crops (Humanitarian Action, 2023). And storm systems have intensified too. Hurricane Beryl (2024) and Cyclone Lola (2024) reached unprecedented early-season strength in the Caribbean and Pacific, respectively. They caused losses equivalent to a significant proportion of national gross domestic product (GDP) and erased years of developmental progress in hours.

This is precisely what makes SIDS a 'special case': they are uniquely exposed to shocks that can erase years of gains, and thus they need special treatment in global governance.

SIDS have initiated numerous domestic mitigation and adaptation measures in response to these ecological pressures. For example, across the Pacific, community-based management is being advanced at scale in Fiji, Palau and the Solomon Islands through networks of Locally Managed Marine Areas (LMMAs), empowering villages to set fishing rules, restore mangroves and monitor reef health.

More and more SIDS are committing to net-zero by 2050 and raising 100% renewable-energy targets, with steady progress on domestic mitigation. Across the Pacific, installed renewable capacity has expanded sharply over the past decade as states cut their reliance on imported fuels and strengthen their energy security (WEF, 2024). Barbados is a leader in the Caribbean, with one of the world's highest per capita adoption rates of solar-water

Vanuatu's Climate Minister Ralph Regenvanu speaking outside ICJ. Photo: Heute.at/JOHN THYS/AFP/picturedesk.com.



heaters and complementary energy-efficiency measures, including building code reforms to reduce cooling demand ([Government of Barbados, 2025](#)). Despite this momentum though, the roll-out of utility-scale renewables faces structural barriers, including high logistics and shipping costs, long procurement timelines and small market size that complicate assessments of cost-effectiveness ([WEF, 2024](#)).

Some SIDS are integrating nature-based solutions (NbS) into their adaptation planning too. They are mandating the protection of mangroves and reefs as critical infrastructure in new development projects ([Hilmi et al., 2026a and 2026b](#)) and strengthening safeguards for extensive seagrass meadows. This is evident in the Bahamas, whose seagrass ecosystems account for a globally significant share of blue-carbon storage and are now central to national climate adaptation and carbon sequestration strategies ([Fu et al., 2023](#)).

Through sustained coalition-building and legal entrepreneurship, SIDS have helped secure landmark decisions.

Ambitious MSP and blue finance instruments have also been deployed. One example is the comprehensive Marine Spatial Plan pioneered by the Seychelles that places zones in its entire EEZ in an effort to balance conservation, sustainable fishing and tourism development. This is supported financially by a debt-for-nature swap and blue bond issuance, channelling international capital into local conservation and climate adaptation projects ([March et al., 2024](#)).

And SIDS have complemented these domestic policies with consistent international advocacy. SIDS' defining contribution has been to secure climate justice, in an effort to transform survival imperatives into binding legal obligations for the major emitting states. Often this has been accompanied by calls for reparatory justice too.

Through sustained coalition-building and legal entrepreneurship, SIDS have helped secure landmark decisions that classify greenhouse gas emissions as marine pollution under UNCLOS ([ITLOS, 2024](#)) and that affirm states' due diligence and reparations obligations for harm to the marine environment ([UN News, 2025](#)). At the International Maritime Organization (IMO) in 2025, the 6PAC+ bloc of Pacific, Caribbean and African SIDS pressed for a universal carbon levy and equitable revenue-sharing to align shipping decarbonisation with existential SIDS priorities ([Radio New Zealand, 2025](#)).

Despite this progress, however, disaster-related aid in the Caribbean frequently follows donor-driven priorities rather than SIDS-led plans. Often, aid is not coordinated in ways that embed domestic capacity ([Wilkinson et al., 2025](#)). For instance, independent evaluations of the response to Hurricane Dorian in 2019 highlight the dominant role of international agencies and the difficulties of aligning recovery with national priorities. More broadly, regional governance studies emphasise that external financing structures and historical aid modalities still shape response and recovery in ways that risk entrenching dependency and limiting the scope for SIDS-owned, locally embedded resilience-building ([Galaitis et al., 2023](#); [Mohan, 2023](#)) (see Box 5.1 and Box 5.2).

Box 5.1 Disaster capitalism: undermining local communities in SIDS

There are striking examples across SIDS of colonial legacies, neocolonial patterns of foreign intervention and inappropriate models for disaster response that have exacerbated, rather than diminished, disaster risk in SIDS.

Disaster capitalism refers to situations where a crisis is leveraged to advance neoliberal reforms and private interests, often at the expense of local communities and ecological integrity. Colonial legacies and uneven development compound these impacts, with low-income groups often bearing the brunt of displacement and receiving the least from recovery efforts (Klein, 2008).

For example, recent climate-related disasters in the Caribbean – including Hurricanes Irma (2017), Maria (2017), Dorian (2019), Beryl (2024) and Melissa (2025) – have resulted in widespread displacement, infrastructure collapse and long-term socioeconomic disruption. In Barbuda, Hurricane Irma destroyed nearly 90% of infrastructure, prompting full evacuation and triggering controversial land reforms that undermined communal land rights in favour of privatisation (Rhiney, 2020; Look et al., 2019).

Box 5.2 Decolonising the sustainability paradigm

Mainstream sustainability paradigms are not neutral either – instead they often uphold dominant power structures and prevailing economic systems.

Sustainability and climate discussions have reduced complex ethical questions to quantifiable indicators framed through technocratic and market-driven logics (Ratuva, 2021; Owens et al., 2025). For example, instruments like carbon offsetting often transform ecological breakdown into technical problems solvable by markets. This avoids scrutiny of capitalist extractive machinery and places the burden of response on vulnerable communities like SIDS. In turn, these island nations must compete for limited pools of finance while the same development model that caused the crisis is presented as a tool to solve it (Pielke, 1998; Vunibola et al., 2025).

This is impacting conservation models.

In the Indian Ocean, the Seychelles is widely feted as pioneering an innovative approach to marine conservation, combining a sovereign blue bond and a national MSP (Seychelles Marine Spatial Plan). Yet evaluations warn that such instruments can slip into ‘blue washing’ if market logics and external actors override local priorities and distributive justice (March et al., 2024).

Across the Caribbean, new science confirming the Bahamas as a global seagrass blue carbon hotspot has catalysed interest in carbon credit monetisation. While this may mobilise new funds for protection, it also risks ceding control if crediting standards and verification are designed off-island and if they prioritise investor concerns over those of Bahamian communities (Fu et al., 2023; Sherburne, 2023).

Global North conservation models can also frame human presence as destructive, justifying top-down initiatives like national parks that can displace Indigenous peoples and commodify wilderness through tourism (Dowie, 2011; Shafer, 2015). In Belize, contestation around the Hol Chan Marine Reserve – including fee hikes and disputed coastal works at Cayo Rosario – shows how Marine Protected Area (MPA) governance can be pulled towards tourism and investor priorities, marginalising fishers' knowledge and livelihoods that underpin long-term ecological outcomes (San Pedro Sun, 2024; Greater Belize Media, 2025; Belize Fisheries Department, 2025).

These approaches can ignore Indigenous stewardship, fail ecologically and reproduce colonial patterns of dispossession and epistemic erasure. They undermine the very communities whose knowledge systems offer pathways to genuine sustainability.

5.2 Recent trends and contributions

5.2.1 Ocean pressures, legal milestones and precautionary norms

The ocean resources that underpin SIDS' identities and economies face significant stress.

Nearshore fish stocks essential for food security and local livelihoods are declining due to overfishing, habitat loss and climate-driven changes in species distribution. Ocean acidification and slow-onset warming of oceans are bleaching coral reefs. And projections for SIDS indicate that, by the end of the century, the Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, Nauru, Palau, Tuvalu, and São Tomé and

Príncipe are expected to experience the largest reductions in maximum fisheries catch potential (Bahri et al., 2025).

Rising ocean temperatures are also triggering harmful algal blooms that wash ashore and decompose, especially in the Caribbean. This creates a persistent and costly cleanup burden and undermines the desirability of beaches vital to the tourism economies of many SIDS (Mohan and Strobl, 2025). Blooms smother seagrass beds and disrupt fisheries too, impacting biodiversity and livelihoods.

These trends are compounded by marine plastic pollution, ghost nets and toxic runoff, which threaten marine ecosystems and human health in islands that make minimal contributions to global waste. SIDS face acute challenges in managing limited landfill space and toxic waste from

agriculture and settlements. Pollution from land-based sources, including agrochemicals and inadequately treated sewage, also degrades water quality and coastal ecosystems. Meanwhile, recycling is often unfeasible in SIDS due to low waste volumes, high transport costs and geographic isolation – constraints that are particularly acute for atoll nations with remote and highly scattered islands and scarce land for waste management.

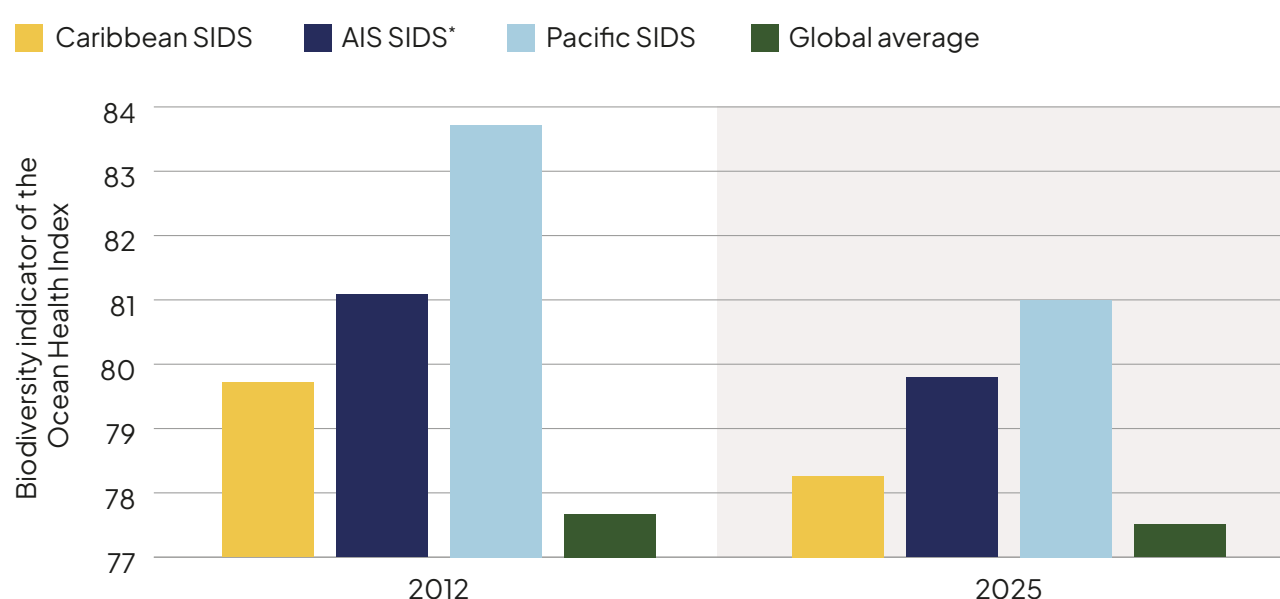
Scholars and policy-makers have described the phenomenon as ‘waste colonialism’. Island states making minimal contributions to global pollution disproportionately bear the burden of imported waste streams and marine debris (Liboiron, 2021; Fuller et al., 2023; Peryman et al., 2024).

The Ocean Health Index shows a decline in ocean biodiversity across all SIDS regions

since 2012 (Figure 5.1). Though biodiversity in SIDS waters is at a ‘healthier’ level overall than the global average, the data also show that ocean biodiversity is falling across the EEZs of Pacific, Caribbean and AIS SIDS.

SIDS have recognised these challenges though and are leading global efforts to drive a sustainable blue economy. For example, they have taken important steps to curb plastic pollution, both ‘at home’ and globally. Outright bans on various single-use plastic products (e.g., plastic bags, straws and food service containers) have been implemented in 27 SIDS, while several others have introduced tariffs, partial restrictions or deposit-return schemes to reduce consumption and landfill pressures (GIZ, 2022; Hurley et al., 2025). Early movers such as Fiji, Palau and Samoa adopted restrictions nearly two decades ago, and momentum has accelerated as these policies have shown to be effective (GIZ, 2022).

Figure 5.1 Ocean biodiversity, 2012–2025



Note: *Excluding Singapore.

Source: National Center for Ecological Analysis and Synthesis (n.d.) Ocean Health Index (<https://oceanhealthindex.org/global-scores/data-download/>), 23 January 2026.

Globally, SIDS have called for an ambitious United Nations (UN) Plastics Treaty to address the full lifecycle of plastics – from production and design to disposal. The global failure to conclude this Treaty in 2025 represents a setback for SIDS, of course. Global production and waste volumes continue to rise, further entrenching the inequitable distribution of marine pollution impacts faced by these island nations.

SIDS have achieved important ‘wins’ in recent years, however, including international recognition of their need for special and differential treatment.

The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction (the BBNJ Agreement) was adopted in 2023. It creates legally binding provisions for biodiversity conservation in high sea areas beyond national jurisdiction and environmental impact assessments (UN, 2023). The BBNJ

Agreement recognises SIDS specifically, including in provisions for benefit-sharing, financial assistance and technology transfer.

The 2022 World Trade Organization (WTO) Fisheries Subsidies Agreement represents a landmark ruling too, aligning trade rules with sustainability objectives. Crucially, it prohibits subsidies contributing to IUU fishing and overcapacity and it mandates transparency and reporting obligations (WTO, 2024). For SIDS, this Agreement offers opportunities to curb industrial exploitation, but it also raises concerns about compliance burdens and unintended impacts on small-scale fisheries critical for food security and cultural continuity. These dynamics underscore the need for capacity-building and equity safeguards so trade reforms do not exacerbate vulnerability in island economies.

Meanwhile, the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) and ICJ rulings strengthen the legal basis for precautionary approaches to DSM. Antigua and Barbuda,



The Maldivian Minister of State, Amzath Ahmed, UNOC3, 2025. Photo: RESI/ Sylvie Pope Photography.



the Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, the Marshall Islands, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, the Solomon Islands, Tuvalu and Vanuatu have declared moratoria on DSM, grounded in cultural values and ecological uncertainty (Kasanawaqa et al., 2025).

Central to this resistance is the Pacific-led call for a moratorium – launched in 2021 and now supported by over 130 environmental organisations, 40 governments and several private sector actors – to allow more time for scientific research, regulatory development and regional consensus (DSMC, 2023).

Importantly, these precautionary measures align with, and should be understood as part of, wider efforts by SIDS to expand marine protection through both statutory MPA and community-based LMMAs. While few SIDS have currently met the ‘30by30’ target of conserving 30% of land, waters and seas by 2030 (GBF, n.d.), many have set ambitious MPA targets. Countries such as Palau have designated large-scale no-take zones that restrict industrial activity to protect biodiversity, fisheries stocks and cultural seascapes, for example. Complementing national MPAs, LMMAs in Fiji and Palau draw on customary tenure systems, *tabu* areas where fishing is not permitted and community stewardship practices to regulate fishing pressure, rebuild reef ecosystems and strengthen climate resilience.

Table 5.1 Countries supporting a DSM ban, precautionary pause or moratorium

Precautionary pause	Moratorium	Ban
Austria, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Croatia, Cyprus, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Finland, Germany, Greece, Guatemala, Honduras, Ireland, Denmark, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta, Monaco, Panama, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Tuvalu, Vanuatu	Antigua and Barbuda, Aotearoa New Zealand, Canada, Federal States of Micronesia, Fiji, the Marshall Islands, Mexico, Palau, Peru, Romania, Samoa, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the European Union Parliament	France

Note: Correct as of October 2025.

Source: Kasanawaqa et al. (2026).

These hybrid MPA–LMMA governance regimes form a multilayered marine conservation architecture, led by SIDS, that reinforces the same foundational principles underpinning the DSM moratoria. Together, these measures signal jurisprudence of ocean stewardship rooted in intergenerational equity and Indigenous knowledge systems ([Kasanawaqa et al., 2026](#)).

5.2.2 Disaster impacts and integrated resilience frameworks

SIDS are disproportionately vulnerable to natural hazards and they suffer systemic impacts that overwhelm their size and resources. A single event can affect a significant proportion of a nation's territory, population and economic infrastructure simultaneously.

The economic consequences of a disaster are severe due to the narrow economic base typical of most SIDS. For example, Hurricane Maria in 2017 caused damages equivalent to 226% of Dominica's GDP, devastating the agricultural sector and critical infrastructure ([IMF, 2021](#)). Similarly, the 2024 earthquake in Vanuatu caused direct economic damage estimated at US\$197 million, equivalent to 17% of GDP ([World Bank, 2025](#)).

With aid resources for relief and reconstruction far outstripped by need, such events force states into high-cost borrowing for reconstruction and they divert essential public funds from long-term development towards short-term recovery.

Repeated cycles of shocks lead to debt burdens, as seen in Antigua and Barbuda and

the Bahamas following Hurricane Irma in 2017 and Hurricane Dorian in 2019, respectively ([Hurley et al., 2024](#)). Remittances from diaspora communities (e.g., Fiji, Samoa) can support DRR efforts but they clearly cannot substitute systemic planning and inclusive governance.

Globally, disaster mortality declined from approximately 1.61–1.62 to 0.79–0.82 deaths per 100,000 population between the 2005–2014 and 2014–2023 periods. Yet mortality rates in SIDS remain more than double the global average ([UNDRR, 2023](#); [Sendai Framework Monitor, 2024](#)).

The share of the population affected by disasters is also disproportionately high in SIDS, with roughly 18% affected per event compared to about 6% in non-SIDS ([UNDRR, 2024a](#)). Economic losses average around 2.1% of GDP annually in SIDS versus 0.3% globally ([UNDRR, 2024b](#)). Preparedness indicators show similar gaps: although 108 countries report multi-hazard early warning systems (MHEWS), only about 39% of SIDS have such coverage ([UNDRR, 2024c](#)); and while 129–131 countries have adopted national DRR strategies, only 24 SIDS have formal strategies in place ([UNDRR, 2024b](#)).

SIDS have made some progress on DRR though. In the Caribbean, MHEWS encompass impact-based forecasting and gender-responsive approaches ([UNDP, 2020](#); [UN Women and UNDRR, 2025](#)). In both the Caribbean and the Pacific, regional parametric insurance mechanisms have quickly provided liquidity in the wake of extreme weather events. In the Pacific, coastal adaptation planning and National Adaptation Plan processes have accelerated ([PCRIC, 2024](#); [SPREP, 2013](#)).

SIDS also recognise that embedding DRR into socioeconomic development and urban planning – guided by the UN Sendai Framework (UNDRR, 2023) – is essential to building hazard resilience. Similarly, many SIDS see that DRR must be reframed as a political and justice-oriented process. This means integrating Indigenous and local knowledge, empowering women and youth, and linking early warnings to social protection. Pacific regional cooperation has also grown since COVID-19, while emerging digital technologies offer new pathways to enhance domestic planning and implementation capacity (Connell and Campbell, 2025).

Many SIDS see that DRR must be reframed as a political and justice-oriented process.

Anticipatory migration and resettlement are becoming more common across SIDS regions, but land-tenure complexity can lead to conflict, dispossession and ‘disaster capitalism’ (see Box 5.1). Evidence from Fiji and Papua New Guinea shows short-distance resettlement is more viable when communities retain access to original sites and cultural continuity. But the aftermath of Manam volcano eruptions in Papua New Guinea highlights the costs of unclear responsibilities and poor coordination (Connell and Lutkehaus, 2017).

Globally, SIDS have also engaged to shape international frameworks for DRR, which are reinforced by and align with the ABAS. They advocate for their unique vulnerabilities and promote risk-informed development. For instance, their lobbying ensured the Sendai

Framework explicitly recognises SIDS as needing special attention and support through international cooperation. They also use forums such as the Global Platform for DRR to push for increased DRR investment and mainstreaming across development planning. Innovative regional mechanisms like the Caribbean Catastrophe Risk Insurance Facility (CCRIF) and the Pacific Catastrophe Risk Assessment and Financing Initiative (PCRAFI) serve as international models for disaster risk financing and analytics.

Overall, though, while there has undoubtedly been some progress to address rising DRR challenges in SIDS, the risks cannot be overstated. Evidence from the *Sixth assessment report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (IPCC) underscores escalating climate risks for SIDS and highlights that hard and soft adaptation limits – such as irreversible loss of freshwater lenses, chronic coastal inundation and ecosystem degradation – have already been reached in some locations. These limits reinforce longstanding assertions that SIDS constitute a global special case, requiring strengthened anticipatory planning, tailored finance and robust coastal resilience (IPCC, 2023).

5.2.3 Biodiversity loss, global frameworks and regional pathways to protect and restore ecosystems

The Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF), adopted at COP15 to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity in 2022, commits to halting biodiversity loss and restoring ecosystems globally by 2030. Key objectives are to conserve 30% of terrestrial, inland water and

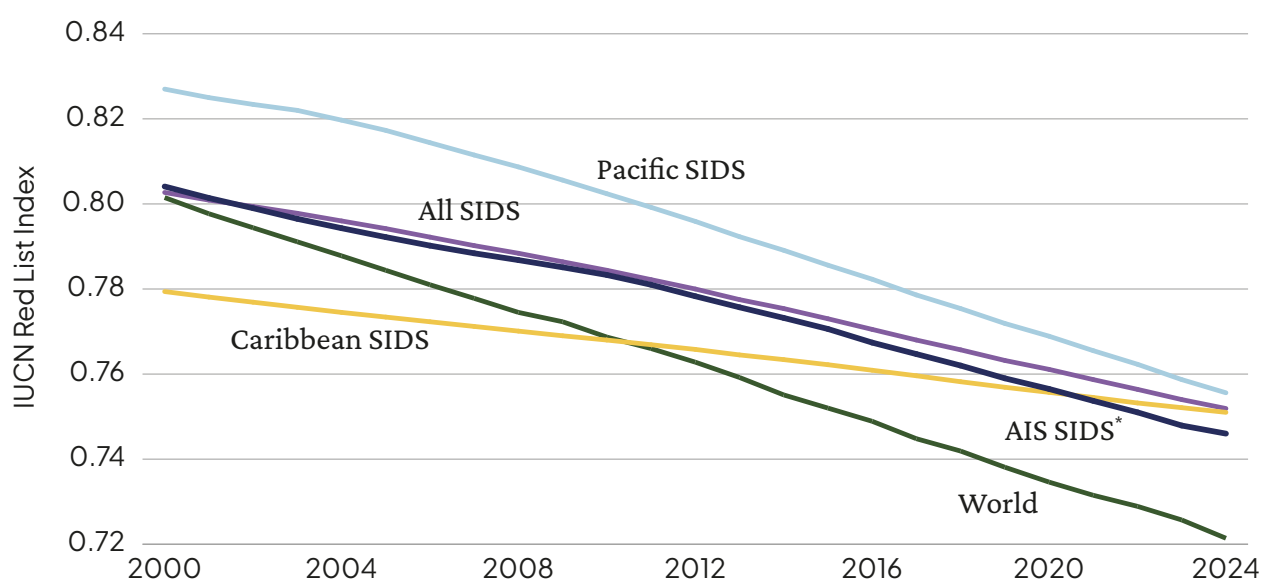
marine areas (the ‘30by30 goal’), reduce harmful subsidies by US\$500 billion annually, halve pesticide pollution, control invasive species on islands, and mobilise US\$200 billion annually in financing to combat biodiversity loss (Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, 2022). The GBF emphasises rights-based approaches, recognising Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLC) as key actors in conservation governance, and it mandates equitable benefit-sharing from genetic resources (Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, 2022).

Importantly, the GBF explicitly recognises SIDS as a priority group requiring special support. Under GBF Goal D and Target 19, SIDS are identified alongside Least Developed Countries as needing enhanced

and accessible means of implementation, and increased international financial flows of at least US\$20 billion per year by 2025 and US\$30 billion per year by 2030 (Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, 2022). In line with their special case, a SIDS Coalition for Nature was launched at COP15 to catalyse strategic partnerships and advocate for SIDS’ priorities.

SIDS are custodians of critical biodiversity but, like in other world regions, this biodiversity is under threat. The number of species at risk of extinction according to the UN’s Red List Index may be lower, on average, for SIDS than elsewhere, but the data also show that extinction risks have increased over the last 25 years across all SIDS regions (Figure 5.2). Particularly sharp rises have been observed in the Pacific region.

Figure 5.2 Species extinction risk, 2000–2024



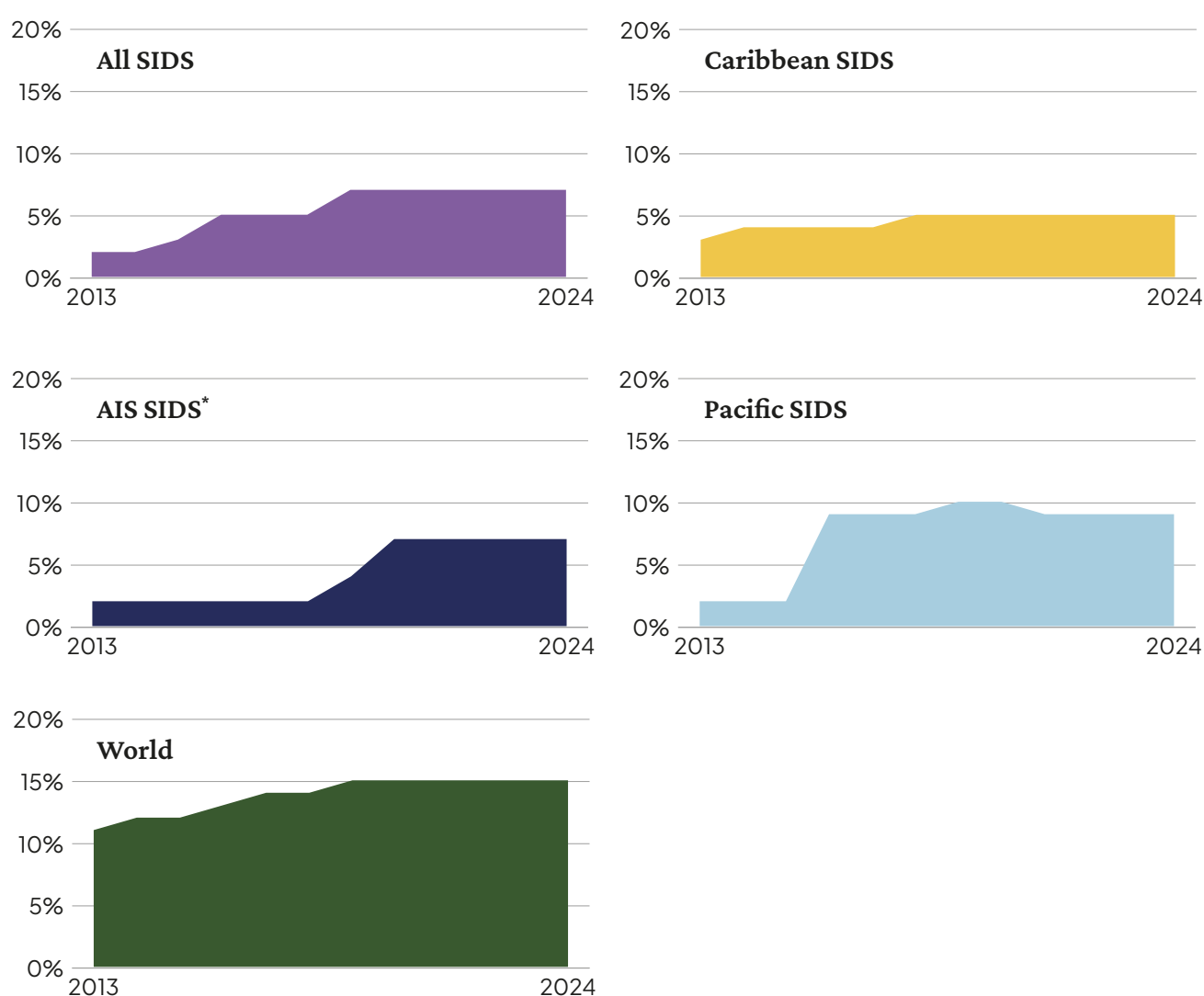
Note: *Excluding Singapore. The Red List Index measures overall extinction risk across groups of species with lower values indicating higher risk.

Source: UN Stats (n.d.) UN Stats data portal (<https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/dataportal/database>), 23 January 2026.

SIDS also need to do more to reach internationally agreed targets on biodiversity conservation and protected areas. Currently, only 7% of their total terrestrial and marine areas are designated as protected versus 15% globally. The Caribbean region lags furthest

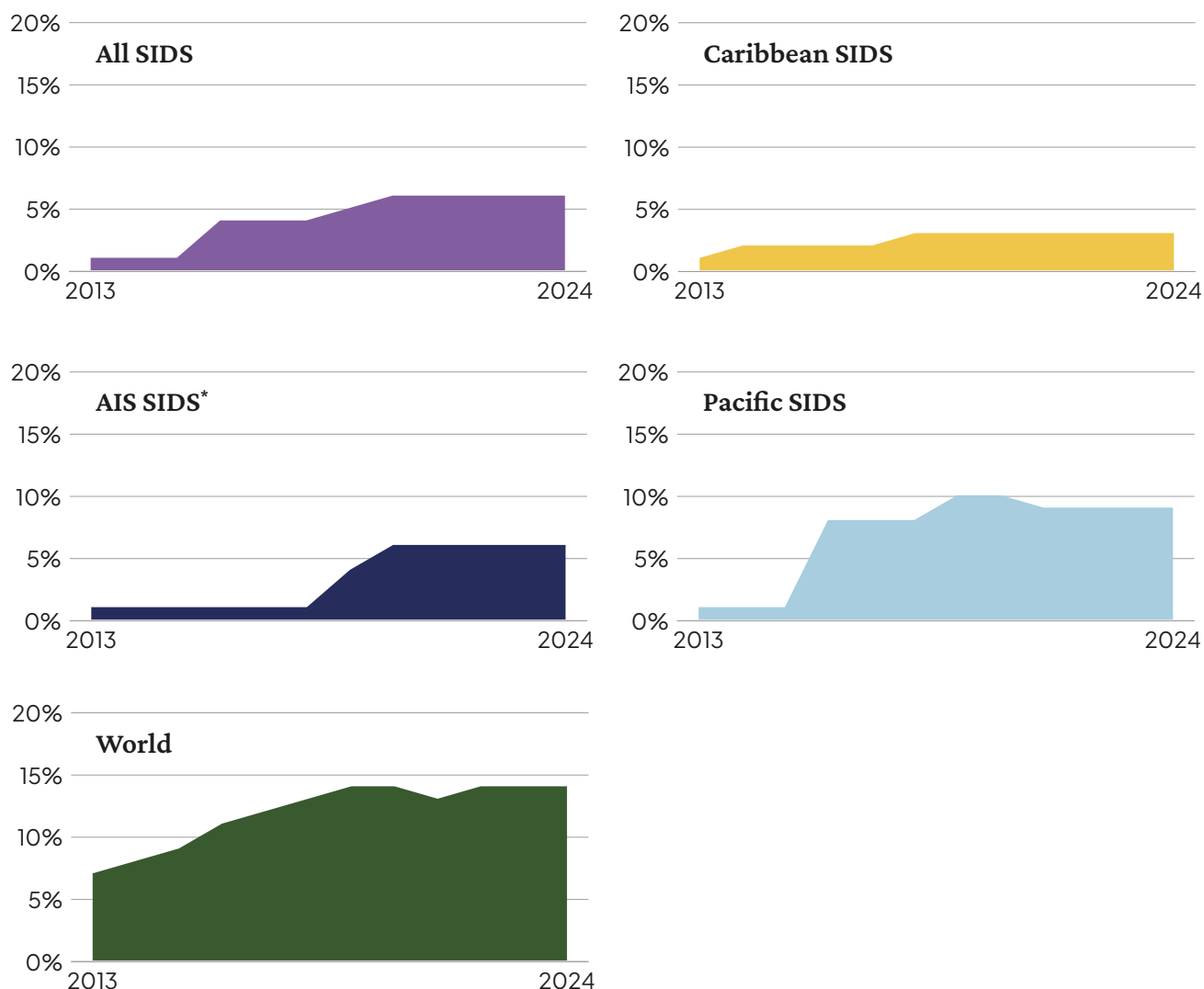
behind with just 5% of its total territorial area protected in 2024 (Figure 5.3). A similar picture can be seen for MPAs specifically, where just 6% of SIDS' territorial waters were designated as protected in 2024 versus 14% globally (Figure 5.4).

Figure 5.3 Total territorial protected area, 2013–2024



Note: *Excluding Singapore.

Source: World Bank (n.d.-a), World Development Indicators (<https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators>), 23 January 2026.

Figure 5.4 Marine protected areas, 2013–2024

Note: *Excluding Singapore.

Source: World Bank (n.d.-b), World Development Indicators (<https://databank.worldbank.org/source/world-development-indicators>), 23 January 2026).

There is evidence that SIDS are strengthening nature conservation though. And they are increasingly placing local and Indigenous communities at the centre in developing the most appropriate solutions.

Implementation in the Pacific is strongly community driven. For instance, Fiji and Palau are leveraging LMMAs and ocean accounts

to track progress towards the 30by30 targets. Fiji's LMMA network exemplifies how customary tenure and Indigenous knowledge systems can underpin marine conservation (SPREP, 2013 and 2021). Additionally, regional bodies like the South Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP) and the Pacific Community (SPC) are aligning GBF targets with the Pacific Islands Framework

for Nature Conservation and Protected Areas 2021–2025, which integrates biodiversity goals with climate resilience and sustainable livelihoods (SPREP, 2021).

In the Caribbean, the Cartagena Convention and its SPAW Protocol provide a legally binding framework for species protection and ecosystem-based management (UNEP-CEP, n.d.). Recent efforts include expanding MPA networks under the Caribbean Challenge Initiative and implementing ecosystem-based adaptation strategies to safeguard coral reefs and mangroves. This has been complemented by regional financing mechanisms such as the Caribbean Biodiversity Fund, which channels resources for GBF-aligned conservation projects (Caribbean Biodiversity Fund, 2023).

The expertise of local communities underpins customary marine tenure, biodiversity stewardship and disaster preparedness.

Progress is being made in AIS countries too. The Maldives National Framework for Protected Areas (2024–2029) sets governance principles and monitoring protocols for MPAs, aligning with the GBF 30by30 target (Ministry of Climate Change, Environment and Energy 2024). Mauritius is scaling up nature-based coastal protection through the restoration of coral reefs and seagrass meadows, particularly in vulnerable lagoon systems; Comoros is implementing mangrove rehabilitation and community-based shoreline protection initiatives to strengthen resilience against erosion and storm surge (IUCN, 2023). São Tomé and Príncipe made history in 2025 by becoming



Mangrove, Kiribati, 2023.
Photo: RESI/Emily Wilkinson.

the first country in the world to have its entire territory – both land and sea – designated as a UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Biosphere Reserve.

IPLC knowledge and NbS are foundational for resilience in SIDS. The expertise of local communities underpins customary marine tenure, biodiversity stewardship and disaster preparedness. It offers governance legitimacy and cultural continuity too. NbS – such as mangrove restoration, coral reef rehabilitation and watershed protection – also deliver co-benefits for climate adaptation, food security and carbon sequestration.

When combined, IPLC knowledge and NbS create synergistic pathways for resilience: the former is essential for site selection, species management and monitoring; the latter operationalises ecological restoration through community-led approaches.

Across all SIDS regions, biodiversity strategies increasingly combine scientific approaches with IPLC knowledge, but challenges remain in securing sustainable financing and in valuing NbS relative to more traditional infrastructure interventions.

For example, mangrove restoration is one of the most cost-effective strategies for coastal protection, fisheries enhancement and carbon sequestration in SIDS. Yet this approach is often undervalued relative to engineered solutions, despite its multifunctional benefits and low cost. Where mangroves have been removed for firewood, infrastructure or sea access, shorelines have receded faster and wave energy has penetrated further inland. This increases hazard exposure – as seen, for example, in Trinidad and Tobago’s Point Lisas industrial zone, where large-scale mangrove clearance accelerated erosion and disrupted coastal hydrology ([Commonwealth, 2020](#)). Across Caribbean SIDS more broadly, mangrove loss of roughly 24% has heightened coastal vulnerability ([UNFCCC, 2017](#)).

Urban NbS such as tree planting, streambank restoration and urban gardening also provide multiple co-benefits, including flood mitigation, heat reduction and food security ([Kiddle et al., 2021](#)). The Mataniko River floods (2014) in Honiara in the Solomon Islands, during which more than 20 people died, show the consequences of weak land-use planning, of informal settlements on steep banks, of deforestation and of clogged drainage. They underscore the urgent need for integrated urban resilience strategies that centre local Indigenous knowledge and inclusive governance in increasingly urbanised SIDS ([Hemstock et al., 2018](#); [Kiddle et al., 2021](#)).

Embedding IPLC knowledge and NbS into MSP, national adaptation plans and biodiversity strategies will be critical for delivering ABAS commitments and for advancing justice and community-oriented approaches. The GBF’s emphasis on equity and IPLC offers a transformative opportunity for SIDS to lead rights-based, ecosystem-centred governance globally, provided that capacity-building and technology transfer commitments can be met ([Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, 2022](#)).

5.3 Evidence and knowledge gaps

Despite valiant locally led efforts and progress in global frameworks, domestic capacities to deliver the aims of the ABAS remain limited in SIDS. Knowledge and data gaps span climate, the ocean, biodiversity and DRR spaces, and these gaps intersect with a lack of IPLC knowledge critical for locally led action.

Financial constraints stifle the ambition of projects, with many relying on short-term external grants rather than sustained investment. Gaps in technical expertise, project management and enforcement also hinder implementation and monitoring ([Robinson and Gilfillan, 2017](#)). At the same time, governance is often fragmented, with environmental, planning and disaster management agencies working in silos. This weakens integrated responses.

The implementation of international treaties and agreements in the fisheries arena and other ocean areas remains patchy. And meanwhile, a persistent deficit in localised

and high-resolution data on ecosystem health, climate risks and socioeconomic vulnerability undermines evidence-based planning and prioritisation.

In the climate arena, data are insufficiently granular to inform anticipatory planning and relocation strategies (IPCC, 2023). Loss and damage accounting methodologies for non-economic losses (i.e., cultural heritage and displacement) are underdeveloped, which weakens valuation and redress mechanisms (UNFCCC, 2023). Climate finance tracking is inconsistent and unreliable too, with incomplete data on adaptation versus mitigation flows to SIDS, plus ‘double-counting’ of climate finance flows and development finance flows (OECD, 2024).

Ocean governance faces parallel challenges. Baseline scientific data for deep-sea ecosystems are sparse, limiting environmental impact assessments for DSM and BBNJ implementation (ISA, 2024). MSP and ocean accounts often fail to integrate ecological datasets and Indigenous and local knowledge, which undermines adaptive governance and legitimacy (SPC, 2025).

Compliance monitoring is weak too, with gaps in vessel tracking and catch reporting complicating enforcement of WTO subsidies and IUU fishing controls (FAO, 2024). Large-scale MPAs such as the Phoenix Islands Protected Area (PIPA) in Kiribati and Palau’s sanctuary show how rapidly conservation commitments can be reversed under fiscal pressures, dependency on revenues from fisheries licences or geopolitical realignments (Kasanawaqa, 2024).

Across all these areas, critical knowledge gaps persist – including in the ecological

effectiveness of large no-take zones over time, the socioeconomic impacts of MPA restrictions on coastal communities, and how Indigenous and local knowledge can be systematically integrated into regulatory design. These unknowns continue to constrain evidence-based and socially legitimate ocean governance.

There are also critical data and funding gaps in DRR. Hazard-exposure mapping for cyclones, tsunamis and coastal flooding is limited, reducing early-warning accuracy and preparedness (UNDRR, 2024a). Infrastructure vulnerability datasets are absent, complicating risk-informed investment and maintenance planning (World Bank, 2024). Community-level indicators for socioeconomic vulnerability and gender-responsive planning remain underdeveloped, while ecosystem-based DRR approaches are chronically underfunded and poorly integrated into national adaptation strategies (UNDP, 2024).

When it comes to nature and biodiversity, evidence on NbS performance under extreme events is also thin (Amon et al., 2022; CSIRO, 2025; Beck et al., 2018; Menéndez et al., 2020; Ford et al., 2025). For example, Pacific mangrove restoration and coral gardening projects lack longitudinal cyclone-grade performance data and robust cost-benefit analyses tailored to high-energy wave environments. Similar gaps persist in Caribbean and Indian Ocean initiatives.

Meanwhile, biodiversity monitoring is fragmented. There are spatial data gaps in GBF implementation tracking for MPAs and for terrestrial conservation targets (30by30), which impedes progress reporting (Secretariat of the Convention

on Biological Diversity, 2022). Indigenous knowledge integration is still limited, with poor documentation and digitisation of customary governance systems restricting inclusion in national biodiversity strategies (UNEP, 2020). And species inventories are incomplete, particularly for endemic and migratory species in AIS and Caribbean regions, thereby undermining conservation planning (Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, 2022).

Finally, frameworks for benefit-sharing and digital sequence information under the BBNJ Agreement and Nagoya Protocol lack standardisation, while coral reef health metrics are uneven, limiting regional resilience assessments and EWS (IUCN, 2023). These gaps undermine the ability to track progress towards global biodiversity targets and to adaptively manage ecosystems under stress.

5.4 Looking ahead

Existing research points to certain prerequisites for securing SIDS environments. These are IPLC knowledge systems for climate adaptation and hazard reduction, plus accelerated implementation of technological innovations, including for desalination, solar energy and satellite-based EWS. New technologies also increasingly offer SIDS important pathways to monitor and conserve their valuable natural assets, provided countries have access to them on equitable terms.

Looking forwards, SIDS will need a rapid step-up in access to and use of big data on nature – from Earth observation and near-shore monitoring to natural capital accounting. This should be blended with locally grounded knowledge systems.

Climate justice is increasingly being recognised as a human rights issue, which strengthens SIDS' claims for financial support and equity in global governance. There is also appetite for deeper intra- and inter-SIDS cooperation through regional platforms such as the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS).

As custodians of vast EEZs and some of the world's most biodiverse seascapes and landscapes, SIDS protect critical global public goods that benefit the entire planet.

SIDS are pioneering blue bioeconomy ventures, transforming resources like kava, seamoss and sargassum into high-value products for pharmaceuticals, cosmetics and clean energy. Here, they are aligning economic diversification and resilience goals with sustainability goals.

Biodiversity and natural resources are the backbone of SIDS – the basis of food security, culture, livelihoods and national identity. However, their natural assets are being eroded at an alarming pace, and in some places irreversibly.

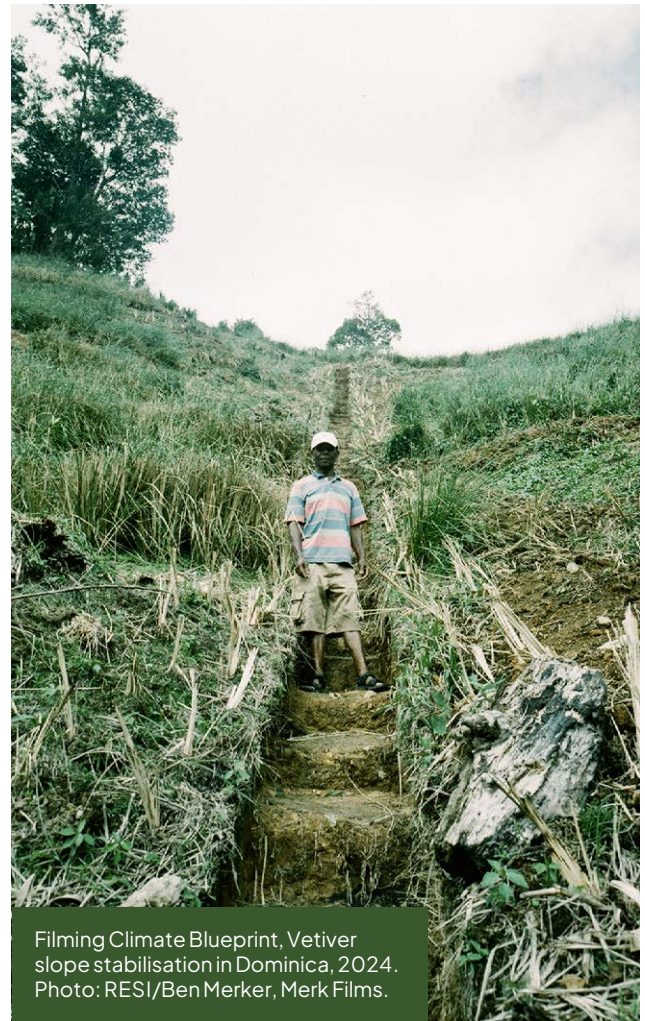
This is not a parochial problem; it is planetary. As custodians of vast EEZs and some of the world's most biodiverse seascapes and landscapes, SIDS protect critical global public goods that benefit the entire planet. Defending the special case for development is, therefore, a practical recognition that safeguarding island nature underpins a

healthy, resilient planet. It is not just a matter of the resilience – and indeed survival – of small island nations.

SIDS are not passive actors. Across all regions, SIDS governments, communities, and Indigenous and local knowledge holders are restoring mangroves and reefs, experimenting with NbS, co-managing marine protected areas and strengthening customary stewardship. They are influencing norms, and they're shaping global legal and policy agendas across climate, ocean governance, biodiversity and DRR.

Significant challenges persist though. Many projects remain small, finance is fragmented and woefully inadequate, and the scale of the ecological emergency outpaces available resources and capacities. International action is too slow and the implementation of international agreements is uneven. The implication is clear: island action must be matched by global reform. SIDS cannot resolve these planetary crises alone.

A central priority is the operationalisation of the ABAS through integrated, cross-sectoral governance. This means breaking down entrenched silos between climate action, ocean governance, biodiversity conservation and DRR, and embedding these within national development planning. In practice, this entails aligning MSP with urban and infrastructure planning, scaling ecosystem-based adaptation and DRR, and ensuring that biodiversity and climate objectives are mutually reinforcing. Crucially, ABAS emphasis on inclusivity requires that Indigenous and local knowledge systems are not treated as supplementary, but as foundational to planning, implementation and monitoring.



Filming Climate Blueprint, Vetiver slope stabilisation in Dominica, 2024. Photo: RESI/Ben Merker, Merk Films.

A second priority is transforming the financing landscape in line with ABAS commitments on means of implementation. Delivering on the ABAS will require a step-change towards predictable, accessible and sustained concessional finance, including grant-based support for adaptation and for loss and damage. It also requires scaling innovative instruments such as blue finance and debt-for-nature swaps, while ensuring they are designed and governed to avoid new forms of dependency and that they deliver tangible local benefits. Beyond capital flows, investment in long-term institutional capacity, maintenance and locally embedded skills is key to ensure resilience gains are sustainable.

The ABAS also underscores the importance of strengthening SIDS' equitable participation in global governance. Recent legal and institutional advances – including recognition of climate obligation under international law, the BBNJ Agreement and evolving precautionary norms in ocean governance – offer important opportunities. However, their transformative potential depends on effective implementation, enforcement and access to benefit-sharing technology transfer. Ensuring that these global frameworks deliver concrete outcomes for SIDS will be a critical test of the ABAS agenda.

At the same time, accelerating access to technology and data is central to ABAS implementation. Advances in Earth observation, EWS, renewable energy and ocean monitoring offer new pathways to strengthen resilience and environmental stewardship. Persistent inequalities in access to technology, data and technical expertise risk reinforcing existing asymmetries though. The ABAS agenda therefore requires technology transfer plus support for localisation, capacity-building and the interrogation of technological systems with Indigenous and local knowledge.

SIDS continue to be framed primarily by their vulnerability. Yet the ABAS articulates a more assertive vision centred on resilience, sovereignty and stewardship.

Finally, delivering on the ABAS requires a shift in global narratives and political economy. SIDS continue to be framed

primarily by their vulnerability. Yet the ABAS articulates a more assertive vision centred on resilience, sovereignty and stewardship. Recognising SIDS as providers of critical global environmental public goods reframes international support as a matter of shared responsibility rather than discretionary assistance. This shift is essential to underpin more equitable partnerships, to strengthen claims for climate justice and reparatory finance, and to ensure SIDS are positioned at the centre of global sustainability transitions instead of the margins.

If the world expects SIDS to safeguard these critical global public goods, it must equip them to do so.

Paradoxically, the recent drift towards falling aid volumes and greater emphasis on self-help will only exacerbate SIDS' vulnerabilities and undermine efforts at self-reliance at a time when climate, ecological and disaster-related risks are rising. It will also shift responsibility back onto islands for crises they have not created.

Instead, SIDS can be empowered to be more effective custodians of their natural environments through the provision of adequate and predictable concessional finance, technology transfer and long-term capacity support. This support must embed skills locally and value local and Indigenous knowledge systems to give voice in international decision-making and to ensure the effective implementation of international climate and environmental agreements. If the world expects SIDS to safeguard these critical global public goods, it must equip them to do so.

6. ADVANCING THE MEANS OF IMPLEMENTATION: STRUCTURAL SOLIDARITY FOR RESILIENT PROSPERITY

Authors

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Summary

International support for Small Island Developing States (SIDS) is uneven and largely fails to provide adequate, predictable and tailored assistance to meet their current sustainable development challenges. This is especially true given accelerating climate change. These implementation gaps threaten to undermine the decade of action outlined in the Antigua and Barbuda Agenda for SIDS (ABAS).

How far *in practice* are the special circumstances of SIDS acknowledged by the international system? The answer to this is critical since it shows how effectively the global community is supporting SIDS to achieve their sustainable development ambitions, as articulated in the ABAS ([UN-OHRLLS, 2024](#)).

Problems with implementation suggest gaps in special-case provision. The quality, scale and coherence of support across financing, capacity-building, politics, and data and technology transfer vary. Efforts do not always align with SIDS' needs, nor are they entirely sufficient to help island nations achieve their 10-year sprint for resilient prosperity ([UN-OHRLLS, 2024](#)).

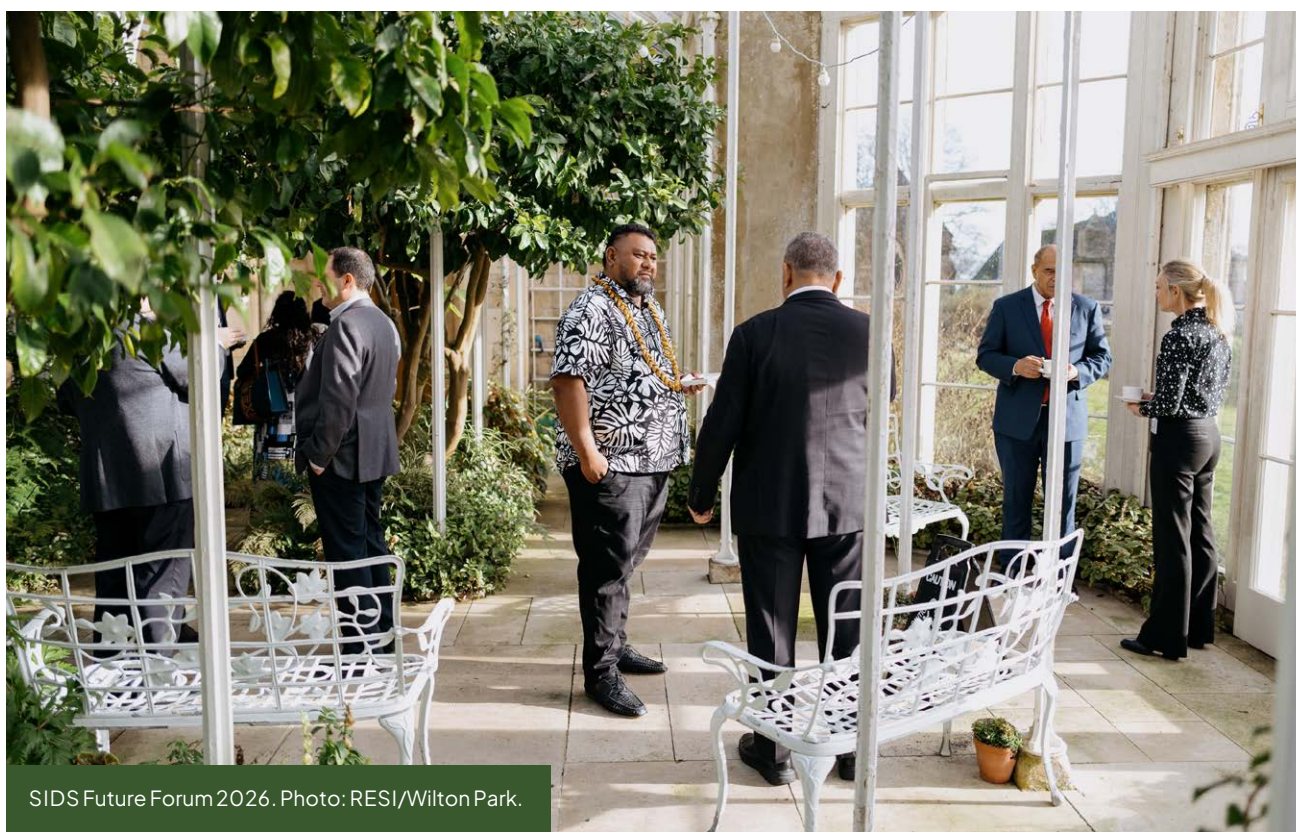
The ABAS addresses assistance commonly referred to by the United Nations (UN) as the 'means of implementation'. This covers the finance, capacity, partnerships, data collection, reporting systems and institutions essential to sustainable development in SIDS, but that have historically created bottlenecks.

The ABAS is clear that SIDS themselves have responsibilities but, crucially, so too do the international community and SIDS' development partners, in particular. Key asks include:

1. multidimensional vulnerability being a criterion to determine eligibility for concessional finance
2. SIDS' representation and participation in decision-making in the international financial architecture
3. support for debt sustainability in SIDS, including through a new SIDS-focused Debt Sustainability Support Service and the SIDS Centre of Excellence
4. greater access to climate finance and innovative financing mechanisms
5. urgent action to operationalise and capitalise the new Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage (FRLD)
6. capacity-building among SIDS populations on technological innovations and technology transfer.

There are signs that international support to SIDS is shifting from symbolic action towards structural solidarity. Largely warm statements of international support that lack action are being replaced by some concrete measures to help SIDS engage in international decision-making on issues that affect them, to build capacity and to access resources to which they are entitled. But this transition is far from complete.





SIDS Future Forum 2026. Photo: RESI/Wilton Park.

6.1 Key debates

6.1.1 SIDS' special case for development

SIDS have secured international recognition of their 'special case for development' by many global bodies and institutions. This includes by the UN, several multilateral development banks and various multilateral climate funds.

This designation was first formalised at the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992, affirming that SIDS are a 'special case both for the environment and development' and should be afforded 'special priority' (UN, 1992a). This laid the normative foundation for support for SIDS from the international community (Bishop et al., 2021 and 2025; Corbett et al., 2021).

The 1994 Barbados Programme of Action (BPOA) heightened international attention on SIDS' unique development challenges, as the first dedicated international framework for SIDS development (UN, 1994; Campling, 2006). Three more international action plans for SIDS crystallised this position: 1) the Mauritius Strategy for Implementation (UN, 2006), 2) the SIDS Accelerated Modalities of Action (SAMOA) Pathway (UN, 2014) and 3) the ABAS (UN-OHRLLS, 2024). These all contain international partnership obligations, with the SAMOA Pathway introducing the SIDS Partnership Framework which states that 'genuine and durable partnerships' are a cornerstone for SIDS' sustainable development (UN, 2014).

Additionally, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) (UN, 1992b) and the Paris Agreement (UN, 2015) recognise SIDS as a 'special case' due to

their disproportionate vulnerability to climate change. Furthermore, the Paris Agreement specifies that developed countries will scale up financial resources to SIDS for both adaptation and mitigation (UN, 2015).

These successes have been achieved, in part, through the efforts of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS). The Alliance has been crucial in advancing the SIDS identity, securing diplomatic visibility and international recognition of the special case since its foundation in 1990 (Bishop et al., 2025).

The SIDS identity does not always carry full weight in key global institutions beyond the UN development system.

International recognition of this special case has, in some instances, been translated into specific, tailored international support mechanisms. As early as 1985, the World Bank introduced its ‘small states exception’, which extended eligibility for concessional finance to more (though not all) SIDS despite their higher per capita incomes and development levels (World Bank, 2023). And for decades, the Commonwealth Secretariat’s Small States Programme has championed small and vulnerable states (Sutton, 2011). This provides tailored technical assistance around public financial management and debt management, plus practical support to access climate finance (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2025).

The international climate finance regime has also evolved, in principle, to offer new opportunities for SIDS. Most notably, eligibility has broadened beyond traditional income-based thresholds to recognise

SIDS and also Least Developed Countries (LDCs) as priority recipients for climate-related resources (GCF, 2011). Long-standing structural challenges persist though.

The SIDS identity does not always carry full weight in key global institutions beyond the UN development system (Campling, 2006). This includes in the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which do not formally accept ‘smallness’ as a specific constraint. As such, SIDS have struggled to achieve special and differential treatment in the trade arena, despite advocating for it for many decades (Heron, 2013; Lindsay, 2019), and they remain marginalised in international economic rules and decision-making that most affect their development prospects.

Similarly, continued reliance on income per capita by most donor countries and lending institutions restricts many SIDS’ access to other forms of concessional finance too (Gay and Reid, 2025; Treichel et al., 2024).

6.1.2 Priorities for SIDS

Across various UN action agendas for SIDS – including most recently the SAMOA Pathway and the ABAS – AOSIS positions have consistently emphasised several critical areas of support or ‘means of implementation’.

For finance, priorities include: eligibility for concessional finance (based on vulnerability and income per capita); the international community meeting its climate finance commitments; a stronger focus on climate adaptation and resilience finance; minimum climate finance allocations for SIDS; more climate finance delivered as grants, not loans; more streamlined access



to climate finance; and more effective debt resolution mechanisms for countries repeatedly hit by disasters.

Reform of the sovereign debt architecture has become more prominent in the ABAS. Explicit calls have been made for a debt sustainability support service and other structural reforms in how the international financial system treats SIDS' debt, including automatic debt cancellation in the wake of qualifying disasters ([Hurley et al., 2024](#)). These priorities are similarly echoed in the Bridgetown Agenda – championed by Barbados and other SIDS since 2022 – to reform the international development and climate finance architecture ([Government of Barbados, 2025](#)).

AOSIS has also persistently emphasised the importance of partnerships ([AOSIS, 2025](#)). In particular, the ABAS reinforces the SIDS Partnership Framework, a UN-led structure to support SIDS through 'new, genuine and durable partnerships' ([UN, 2015](#)). This aims

to shift international cooperation from ad-hoc, donor-driven projects towards more predictable, durable SIDS-led alliances.

Meanwhile, politically, the ABAS and AOSIS have advocated for SIDS' equitable representation and participation in global forums, including decision-making in global economic and international financial institutions.

6.2 Recent trends and contributions

6.2.1 Financial support for SIDS

SIDS' high vulnerability to external shocks and narrow resource base make financial support from external development partners extremely important. As seen from the SIDS Perceptions Survey (see Box 6.1 and Box 6.2), island nations value a range of bilateral and multilateral development partners for various reasons.

Box 6.1 The SIDS Perceptions Survey

A survey was conducted by the Resilient and Sustainable Islands Initiative (RESI) between July and November 2025 to understand how SIDS perceive and value their various development and climate finance partners. The aim was to identify which bilateral donors, multilateral development banks and climate funds SIDS regard as ‘most valuable’, the reasons behind these views, and how governments assess the usefulness and accessibility of different financial instruments through which such support is delivered. The survey also explored the areas that development partners need to improve on to better support SIDS’ priorities under the ABAS.

The questionnaire was organised in four parts to:

1. collect background information on a respondent’s country, region and professional role. It also asked for SIDS’ recent engagements with partners;
2. identify SIDS’ most valued development partners across three categories: bilateral donors, multilateral development banks and climate funds, along with UN partners. This part also asked respondents to provide reasons for their preferences;
3. explore SIDS’ preferences for types of financial support (e.g. grants, concessional loans, innovative finance mechanisms etc.) and assess familiarity with and preference for climate and disaster risk financing instruments;
4. pinpoint key areas for improvement in development-partner support to advance the priorities of the ABAS priorities.

A total of 40 valid responses were received from officials in 29 SIDS. The sample reflects broad geographic coverage across SIDS regions: 21 responses from the Caribbean, 12 from the Pacific and 7 from the Atlantic, Indian Ocean and South China Sea (AIS) region.

The survey captures informed perspectives from officials with extensive institutional knowledge of their respective country’s engagement with development and climate finance partners.

Source: Panwar et al. (2026).

Box 6.2 SIDS' preferences for development partners

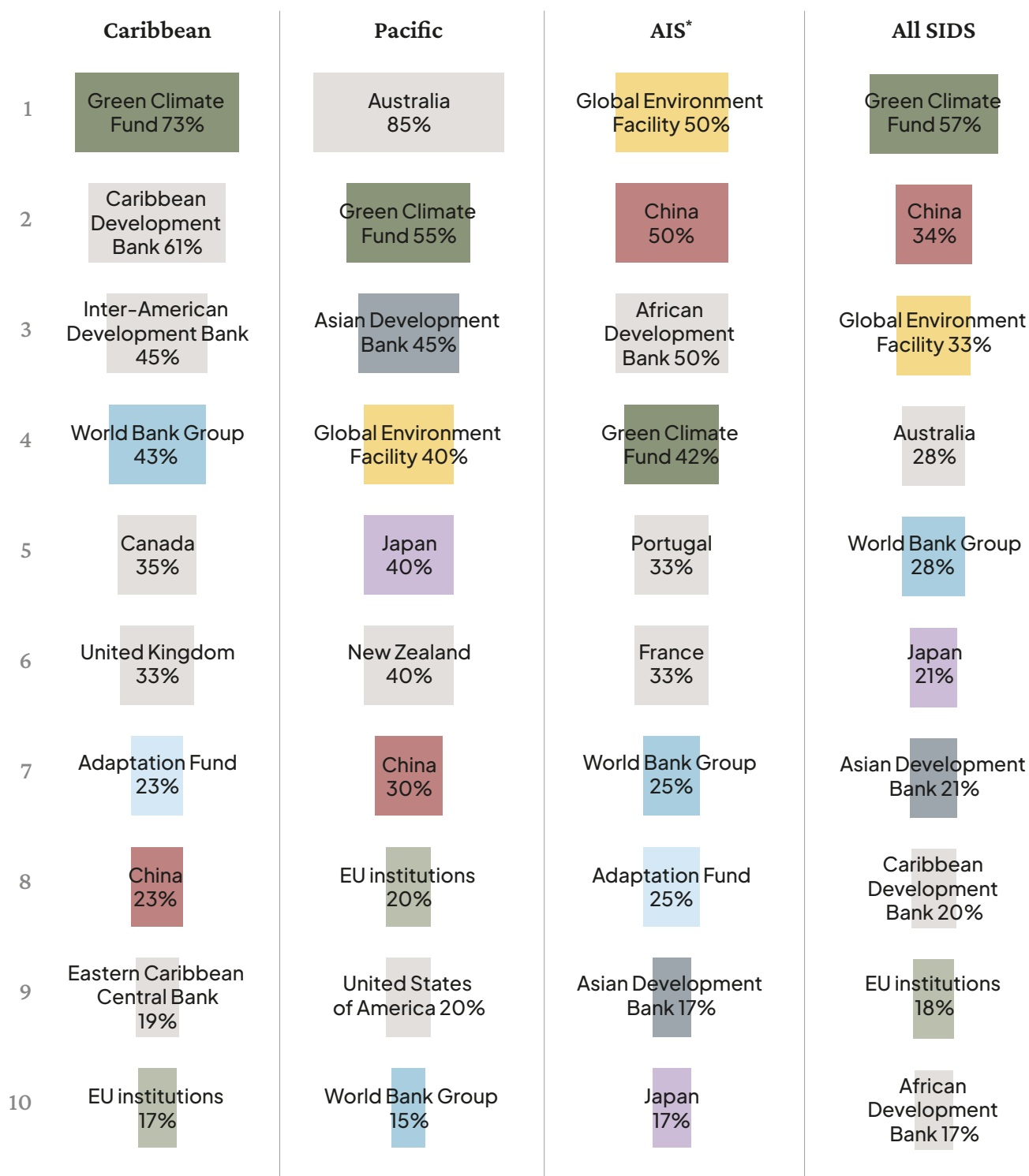
Responses to the SIDS Perceptions Survey show that climate funds are valued most uniformly across regions. The Green Climate Fund (GCF) appears in the top four choices in every SIDS region, with 73% of total mentions from Caribbean respondents, 55% from Pacific respondents and 42% from AIS respondents.

Multilateral development banks hold comparable importance. The Caribbean Development Bank is just behind the GCF in the Caribbean (61%), and the Asian Development Bank ranks highly in the Pacific (45%) and the AIS region (17%). Bilateral preferences reflect historical, geopolitical or geographic ties: Australia dominates the Pacific (85%), the United Kingdom and Canada are prominent in the Caribbean, and China is the top bilateral partner across all SIDS.

Across partner groups, SIDS value institutions that combine accessible financing with strong alignment to national priorities. Ease of accessing funding (70%–83%), alignment with national plans and nationally determined contributions (65%–71%), and reliability of commitments (43%–58%) drive preferences most decisively. High resource volumes matter most for bilateral donors (55%), while climate funds are valued for measurable climate resilience impacts (50%).

Among UN agencies (not shown in Figure 6.1), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is overwhelmingly the most valued partner (88% overall; 86%–92% across all SIDS). This is followed by the UN Environment Programme (52%), the UNFCCC Secretariat (46%) and the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (43%). SIDS most frequently cite alignment with national strategies and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (80%), long-term in-country presence (64%) and specialised technical expertise (52%) as the main reasons UN agencies are integral to their development cooperation landscape.

Source: Panwar et al. (2026).

Figure 6.1 SIDS' preferred development partners

Note: *Excluding Singapore. Respondents were asked to identify their top five most valued development partners across three categories: bilateral donors, multilateral development banks and climate funds. EU = European Union.

Source: Panwar et al. (2026).

Access to concessional finance

The ABAS underscores the importance of access to adequate, affordable finance for SIDS to build resilient prosperity. Yet SIDS' lack of access to adequate concessional finance remains a cornerstone theme.

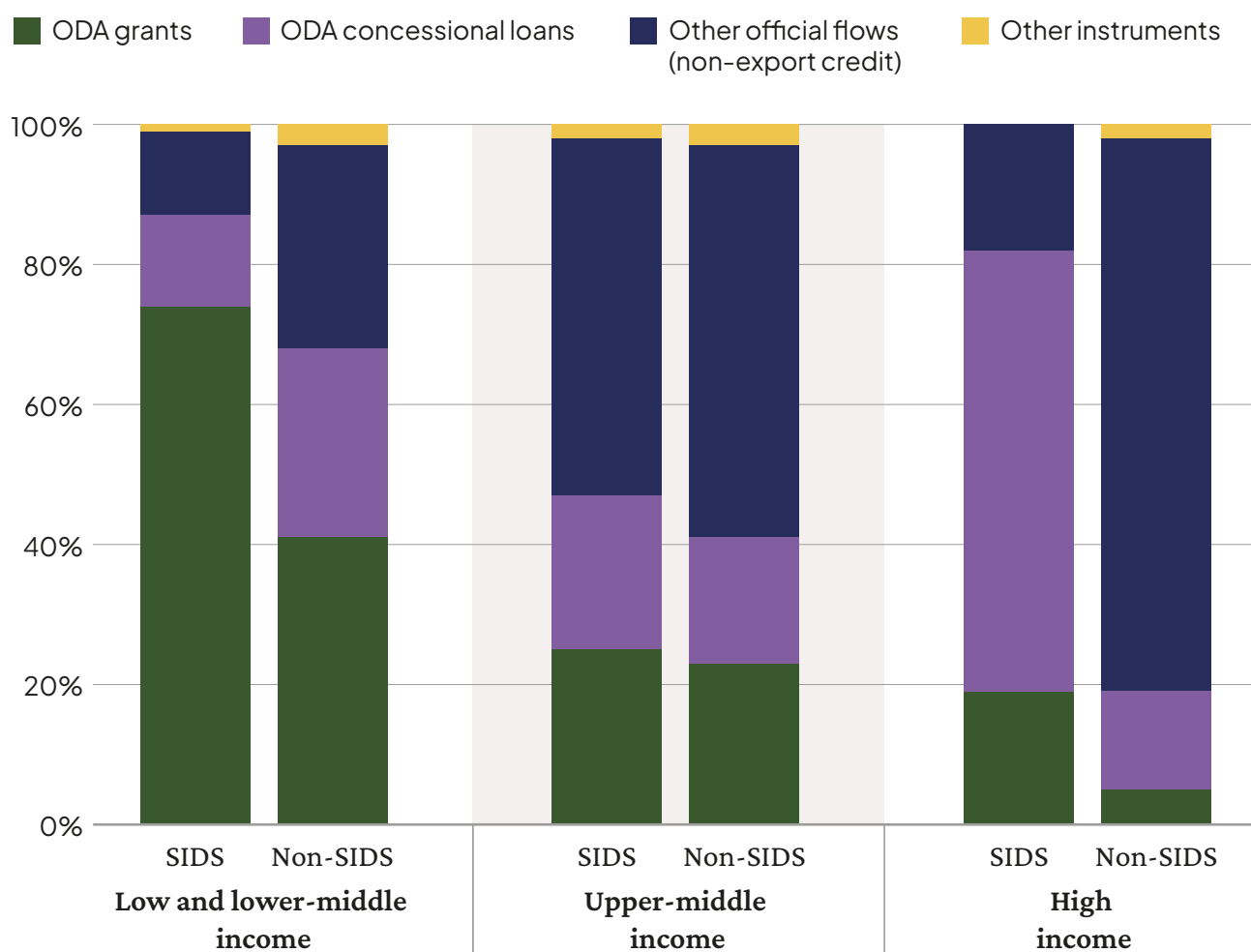
Over the last decade, SIDS have captured consistently small amounts of official development assistance (ODA): on average, just 2.57% of total ODA disbursements annually (Hurley et al., 2024; OECD, 2024). And contractions are anticipated, due to sharp declines in aid flows that are currently underway and that are expected to persist. For instance, 80% of the United States Agency for International Development's (USAID) programmes to Pacific SIDS were cut in 2025, while others are reorienting funds towards security objectives (Huang, 2025).

SIDS' lack of access to adequate concessional finance remains a cornerstone theme.

Respondents to the SIDS Perception Survey reaffirmed that access to concessional finance is a pressing concern. Across SIDS regions, 57% of Caribbean respondents, 58% of Pacific respondents and 71% of AIS respondents rank increased allocation of concessional finance as the top improvement that development partners should prioritise (Panwar et al., 2026). There is also a strong preference for grants, while highly concessional loans are considered acceptable when grant financing is unavailable (see Box 6.3).

For upper-middle-income SIDS, grants represent less than 25% of the external development financing flows they received between 2021 and 2023 (see Figure 6.2); concessional and non-concessional loans (other official flows) make up about 75%. Similarly, in high-income SIDS, less than 20% of development financing flows received over the same period were grants. This compares with low- and lower-middle-income SIDS where grants represent just over 70% of development financing flows. This shows an 'expectation' that higher-income SIDS can shift to loan financing, even though their vulnerabilities to repeated (and costly) climate-related and other external shocks have not diminished.

Reforming the eligibility criteria for concessional finance, and specifically ODA, is a longstanding demand from SIDS. Progress has been slow, but recently there has been some evidence of momentum. For example, the Multidimensional Vulnerability Index (MVI) was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2024 following extensive lobbying and leadership by SIDS. It shows SIDS rank highest in structural vulnerability, above both lower- and upper-middle-income countries, and they are far more vulnerable than income per capita levels suggest (Assa and Meddeb, 2021). The ABAS contains an explicit commitment from the international community to explore how countries can incorporate the tool into aid allocation decisions – reflecting the recent political interest in the MVI and signalling that some see value in 'beyond gross domestic product' measures to guide concessional resource allocation (UN-OHRLLS, 2024; UN, 2024)

Figure 6.2 Composition of international development finance, 2021–2023

Source: OECD (n.d.), ODA data (<https://data-explorer.oecd.org/>), 29 January 2026.

Vulnerability to climate-related and other external shocks is not adequately taken into account when donors allocate scarce concessional resources.

It is important to note, though, that the ABAS commitment did not immediately embed the MVI as an obligatory criterion, and how far these new tools genuinely influence donor

decision-making remains questionable. For example, vulnerability to climate-related and other external shocks is not adequately taken into account when donors allocate scarce concessional resources, showing a continued gap between rhetorical commitment and practical action (Guillaumont, 2025). Ultimately, income per capita is the dominant measure used by donors and lenders who are reluctant to move away from current practices.

Box 6.3 SIDS' preferences for concessional finance

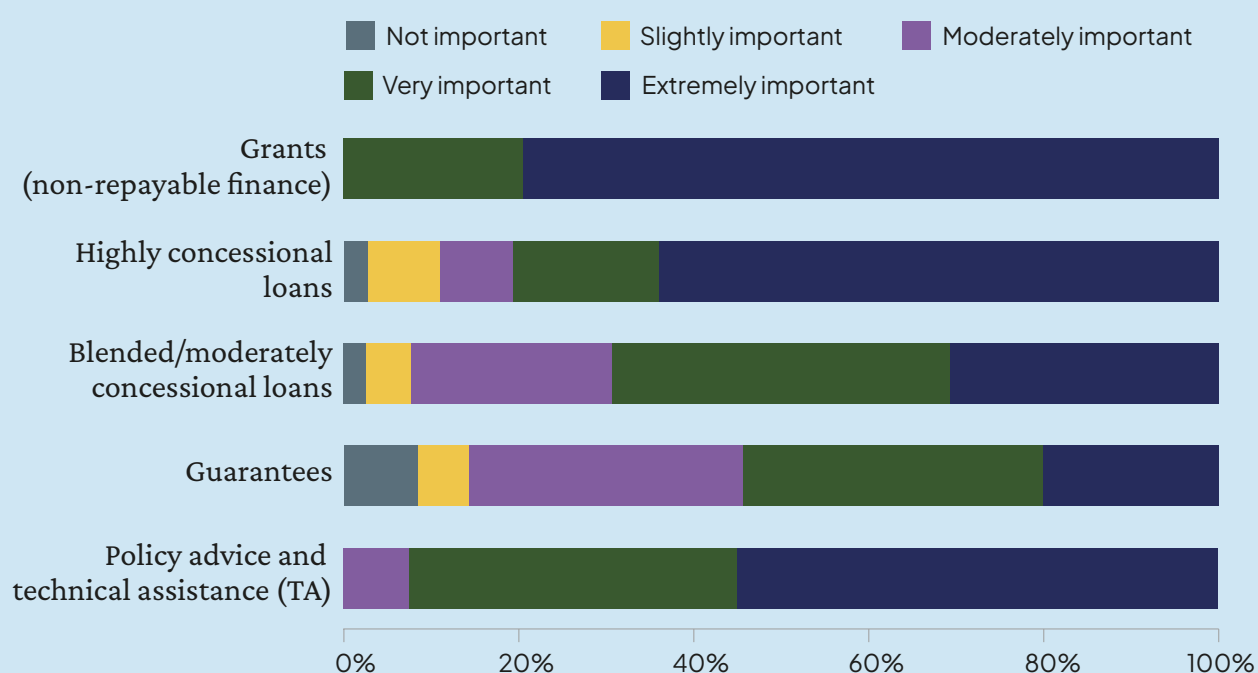
The SIDS Perceptions Survey shows a clear hierarchy in preferences for concessional financing instruments.

Grants dominate, with 77.5% of respondents rating them as *extremely important* and another 20% as *very important*. This holds across all three regions: the Caribbean and AIS regions show the strongest emphasis (81% and 85.7% rating grants as *extremely important*, respectively), while Pacific respondents prioritise grants (66.7% rating as *extremely important*) but with a slightly larger proportion selecting *very important* (33.3%).

Highly concessional loans are preferred next. Overall, 57.5% of respondents consider them *extremely important* and 15% *very important*, with the highest support again seen in AIS countries (71.4%), followed by the Pacific (58.3%) and the Caribbean (52.4%).

Moderately concessional loans are less popular: only 30% view them as *extremely important*, and a greater share place them in the *moderate* or *very important* categories. Credit guarantees, which are designed to improve access to capital markets by reducing perceived investment risk, are ranked lowest across all regions. Although AIS respondents express slightly higher acceptance than their Caribbean and Pacific counterparts, credit guarantees are not a priority in any SIDS grouping.

Figure 6.3 SIDS' preferences for different financial instruments



Source: Panwar et al. (2026).

Access to climate finance

SIDS have also called for better access to climate finance specifically, which the ABAS frames as an existential need and central to resilient prosperity (UN-OHRLLS, 2024).

On this issue, SIDS have achieved some important successes *in principle*; however, *in practice*, this has not yet translated into major structural shifts in how climate finance is accessed and delivered.

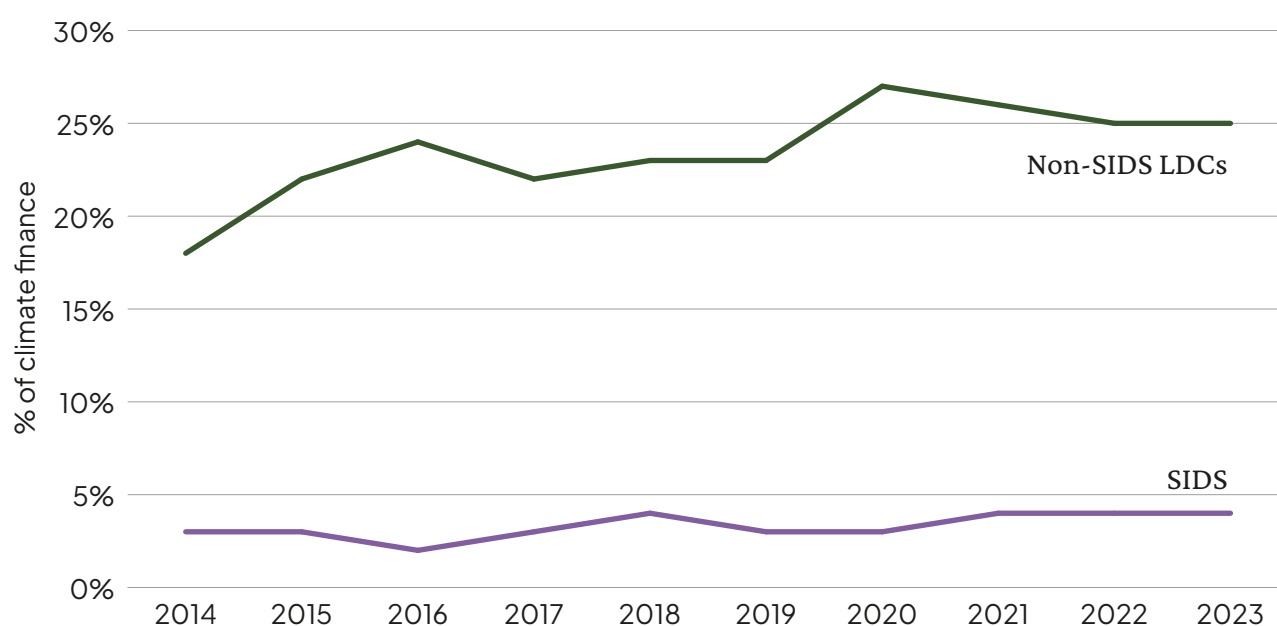
SIDS are, for example, meant to have preferential access to the GCF (GCF, 2011). But they access proportionally less climate finance than other vulnerable groups, having been allocated only 12% of total GCF funding as of June 2024 (Treichel et al., 2024). Projects are also smaller on average than in other countries. In total, the GCF committed around US\$3 billion to projects involving 34 SIDS between 2015 and 2023, but the average financing per SIDS

is about US\$70 million, substantially less than the US\$120 million average provided to non-SIDS countries over the same period (Gordon-Strachan et al., 2025).

Overall, SIDS still receive extremely little climate finance – just 4% of total climate finance in 2023 compared to 25% for LDCs (excluding SIDS), and only 3.3% on average over 2014–2023 versus 23% for LDCs (see Figure 6.4).

Of these small shares received by SIDS, most is delivered as project-based support through a complicated and fragmented web of multilateral, bilateral and intermediary structures; direct budget support is rare (Atteridge et al., 2022). Consequently, SIDS spend considerable time and resources trying to access climate finance, particularly from the multilateral climate funds (Kalaidjian and Robinson, 2022).

Figure 6.4 Total climate finance received, 2014–2023



Source: OECD (2025) (<https://webfs.oecd.org/climate/RecipientPerspective/>), 29 January 2026.

This aligns with the SIDS Perceptions Survey, where 39% of respondents emphasise that shorter approval periods and simplified criteria for funding must be prioritised. Such calls are particularly pronounced among Pacific respondents (50%), where, for example, Fiji's proposal to the GCF cost about US\$1 million and took a year to prepare ([Atteridge et al., 2022](#)). Furthermore, many countries have not yet been able to access climate finance funds independently through national entities, instead relying on international actors with high overheads ([Garschagen and Doshi, 2022](#)).

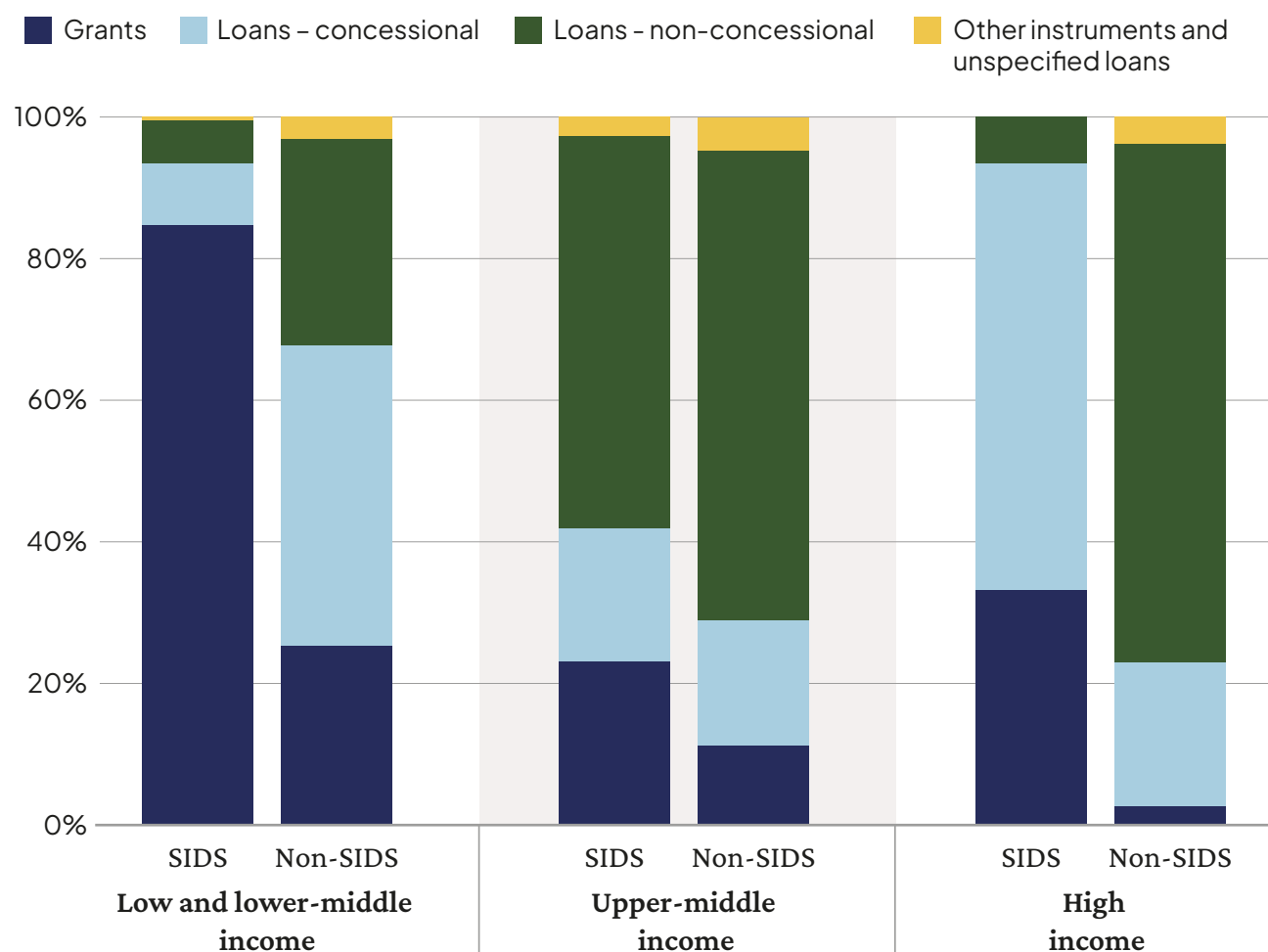
These processes place a high burden on recipient countries, particularly the smallest and most vulnerable. In response, calls have been made for simplified approval tracks so that populations in countries with the lowest institutional capacity but the highest vulnerability are not left behind in the long run ([Wilkinson and Robertson, 2023](#); [Songwe et al., 2022](#)). The key point is that the capacity deficits that impede implementation can be solved by supporting the domestic administrative apparatus in SIDS *and also* by reducing the administrative burdens placed on SIDS by the international system. In fact, given the constraints of small size, it is more likely that reforming administrative processes at the international level will have greater effects.

Despite these well-documented constraints, the SIDS Perceptions Survey suggests SIDS still value the well-established climate funds very highly though. The GCF is valued most (83% of weighted responses), followed by the Adaptation Fund (71%) and the Global Environment Facility (66%). And there is minimal regional variation here: the only notable deviation is in the AIS group, where the African Development Fund appears in the

top five, likely reflecting the preferences of a few countries. These choices show SIDS' inclination towards mechanisms with long engagement histories, dedicated adaptation windows and clearer programming pathways, even when procedures remain burdensome ([Panwar et al., 2026](#)).

Beyond accessibility challenges, SIDS are also concerned with continued imbalances between the funds available for adaptation versus mitigation. Climate finance tends to favour mitigation over adaptation, despite SIDS prioritising adaptation in their national plans and strategies ([Dzebo, 2022](#); [Robinson and Dornan, 2017](#)). Modelled costs for adaptation are estimated at US\$5.1 billion per year, yet actual adaptation finance sits at approximately US\$1.4 billion per year ([Reitmeier and Dookie, 2024](#)). In the Caribbean, for instance, just 32% of climate finance flows are allocated to adaptation ([Perry, 2021](#)). This mismatch happens because donors prioritise reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, because mitigation activities carry relatively higher costs than adaptation activities, and because mitigation projects are more profitable for the private sector.

Additionally, debt burdens grow because about 37% of adaptation finance to SIDS is supplied through loans ([Reitmeier and Dookie, 2024](#)). This pattern is repeated across climate finance generally. In upper-middle-income SIDS, around 56% of climate financing flows received over 2021–2023 were non-concessional loans (see Figure 6.5); high-income SIDS received almost 70% of their climate finance as concessional and non-concessional loans. Only low- and lower-middle-income SIDS received most climate finance as grants (over 80%).

Figure 6.5 Composition of climate finance instruments, 2021–2023

Source: OECD (n.d.) ODA data (<https://data-explorer.oecd.org/>), 29 January 2026.

Despite their vulnerability, SIDS receive significantly less resilience finance compared to less vulnerable countries (Wilkinson et al., 2023). For example, between 2013 and 2021, SIDS were allocated only \$1.84 billion in resilience-related finance, on average, compared to lower-middle-income countries and LDCs, which received an annual average of \$19.56 billion and \$12.85 billion, respectively.

SIDS also report inadequate transparency in climate finance flows, which makes it difficult to track amounts delivered (Atteridge et al., 2022). In part, this is because climate

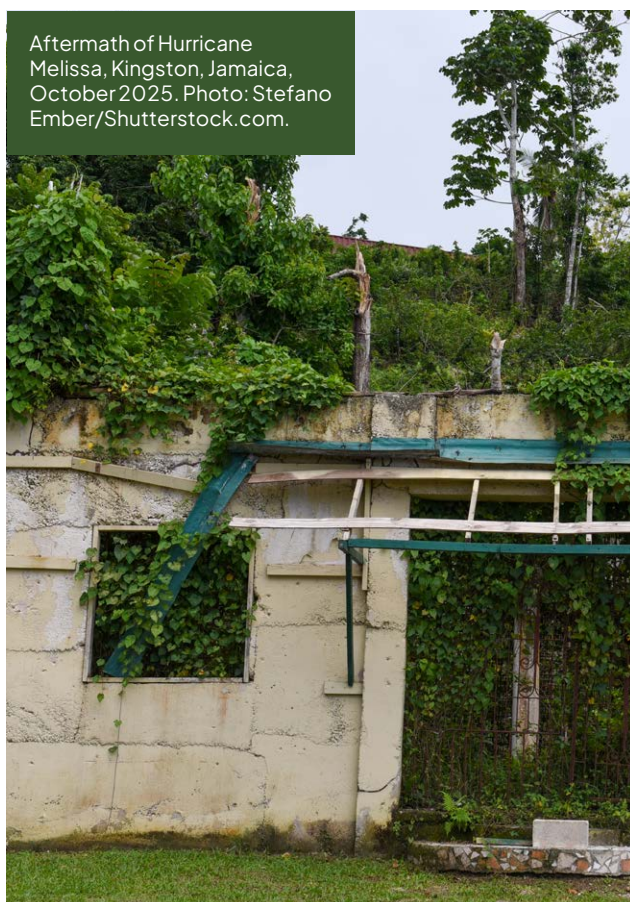
finance is still counted as ODA, leading to ‘double-counting’. In the SIDS Perceptions Survey, 35% of respondents (14% in Caribbean, 33% in Pacific and 57% in AIS) cite transparency and fairness of funding processes as a priority for development partners (Panwar et al., 2026).

Multiple solutions have been proposed to address these constraints in the climate finance architecture. This includes a minimum annual climate finance allocation for SIDS (Wilkinson and Robertson, 2023), and provisions for ‘global solidarity’ to share the

cost of climate-related disasters, especially when they strike SIDS ([Songwe et al., 2022](#)). SIDS have also long called for development finance and climate finance flows to be ‘decoupled’ ([Hurley et al., 2025a](#)).

SIDS are at a critical stage: their vulnerability to external shocks has been acknowledged regionally and internationally, but transformative action is yet to be taken.

Aftermath of Hurricane Melissa, Kingston, Jamaica, October 2025. Photo: Stefano Ember/Shutterstock.com.



Meanwhile, country platforms are being positioned politically as more effective country-owned delivery mechanisms for climate and development finance ([Gul et al., 2025](#); [Bartlett and Mugume Koojo, 2025](#)).

High-level policy forums and the recent Sevilla Commitment also endorsed country platforms as a pathway towards a more coherent, inclusive and scalable climate financial architecture ([UN, 2025a](#)). However, commentators suggest these now need to move from ‘concept’ to ‘credibility’ ([Bartlett and Mugume Koojo, 2025](#)).

SIDS are at a critical stage: their vulnerability to external shocks has been acknowledged regionally and internationally, but transformative action is yet to be taken ([Gordon-Strachan et al., 2025](#)). The international agreement made at COP28 in 2023 to create a loss and damage fund (the FRLD) recognises the principle of climate justice and the need for economic compensation for the harms suffered by SIDS ([Bishop et al., 2021](#)). And while the FRLD now exists and it will prioritise SIDS and LDCs in its start-up phase, access modalities are still being designed and current pledges of financial support remain very low.

SIDS and debt sustainability

High sovereign debt levels have been a longstanding concern for many SIDS. Several islands in the Caribbean and AIS regions are among the world’s most heavily indebted countries, and although debt ratios are lower overall in the Pacific, vulnerabilities have also increased in this region in recent years too ([Hurley et al., 2024](#)).

The COVID-19 pandemic had a major impact on SIDS’ indebtedness, largely due to lost tourism revenue ([Rudge, 2021](#)), though SIDS’ debt levels were increasing even before the pandemic ([Bouhia and Wilkinson, 2021](#)). As such, the ABAS elevates the debt issue compared to previous agendas, explicitly emphasising the need for a global

partnership to tackle public debt, and positioning debt sustainability as a priority for the coming decade.

High debt in SIDS is rarely a problem of fiscal profligacy or poor public debt management, but rather heightened exposure to repeated external shocks (Hurley et al., 2024). SIDS represent two-thirds of countries experiencing the highest relative annual losses due to climate shocks (Bharadwaj et al., 2024) and have increasingly turned to private debt to fund fiscal deficits and respond to shocks. This debt now constitutes over 40% of SIDS' external debt portfolios and is more expensive than official debt, which, in turn, exacerbates debt risks (Hurley et al., 2024).

There is currently limited political interest among donors in fresh rounds of debt relief.

Increased vulnerability to climate change can elevate borrowing costs among SIDS too. Indeed, SIDS' credit ratings have fallen more than in other countries due to climate change impacts (Bharadwaj et al., 2024). Their weak creditworthiness is also influenced by a lack of expertise on SIDS within credit ratings agencies (CRAs), a lack of transparency in CRAs, and a failure to consider the positive impacts of investments in resilience and natural capital protection (Hurley et al., 2025a).

With sovereign debt high on the policy agenda of major international financial institutions and policy forums such as the G20, new 'solutions' have been put forward. For example, there is considerable political momentum around

'innovations' such as Climate Resilient Debt Clauses (CRDCs) and debt-for-nature swaps, and a push for more creditors to adopt these approaches (Hurley et al., 2024; UN, 2025a). Meanwhile, the ABAS calls for a dedicated SIDS Debt Sustainability Support Service and regional mechanisms such as a Pacific Resilience Facility.

More ambitious debt cancellation mechanisms are more difficult though. Some have proposed an automatic debt service cancellation for SIDS following high-impact disasters, arguing this would carry relatively small costs but deliver an outsized impact for SIDS (Hurley et al., 2024). Others have proposed a 'layered approach' to debt sustainability in SIDS: (1) layered debt relief; (2) future protection measures; (3) resilience investment; and (4) legal and advisory support and capacity-building (Bharadwaj et al., 2024). There is currently limited political interest among donors in fresh rounds of debt relief, however.

The shift from temporary crisis responses to more structural reforms to the sovereign debt architecture continues to fall short of what is needed to address high sovereign debt levels. In turn, this undermines implementation across all policy domains in SIDS.

Leveraging innovations in climate and development finance

There is substantial, and often enthusiastic, evidence on the potential of innovative finance mechanisms to mobilise new resources for SIDS (and other countries of the Global South), particularly from the private sector.

Examples include debt-for-nature swaps, blue and green bonds, blended finance tools and other financial instruments (Huang,

2025). The ABAS explicitly encourages the international community to explore such mechanisms, tailored to the specific vulnerabilities and structural constraints of SIDS, and invites development partners to work with SIDS to design new finance platforms (UN, 2024).

Many SIDS are also proactively advocating for financial innovation to remedy high financing gaps. Some SIDS have pioneered debt-for-nature swaps (the Bahamas, Barbados, Belize and Cabo Verde), blue bonds (Fiji and the Seychelles), and parametric insurance (both in the Caribbean and the Pacific), for instance.

The SIDS Perceptions Survey shows a stark difference in their perceived usefulness and uptake, however (see Box 6.4). Responses suggest that some innovative mechanisms may be particularly challenging or out of reach for most SIDS, for example voluntary carbon markets (see Table 6.1).

In practice, many innovative finance mechanisms are highly dependent on both technical expertise and financing from development partners. This includes debt

swap transactions in SIDS, which have been complex, slow to transact and heavily reliant on donor subsidies and expensive external technical support from private advisory firms (Hurley et al., 2025a; Perry, 2021). Their development impact has also been limited due to over-reliance on international non-governmental organisations rather than building local capacities (Radhakrishnan et al., 2025).

There have been isolated successes, but the ability to deploy innovative finance mechanisms at scale is still uncertain. In particular, SIDS are cautious about their ability to crowd-in private sector investment in sustainable development and ocean conservation (Benzaken et al., 2024).

Overall, there may be an ‘unfounded optimism’ in blended finance, when what SIDS really need is greater focus on local resources, including local businesses, personal savings and remittance inflows. These offer significant potential to build more locally centred and resilient systems to finance development and climate adaptation (Mitchell, 2025).

Box 6.4 Perceived usefulness versus implementation of new climate and disaster-risk finance instruments

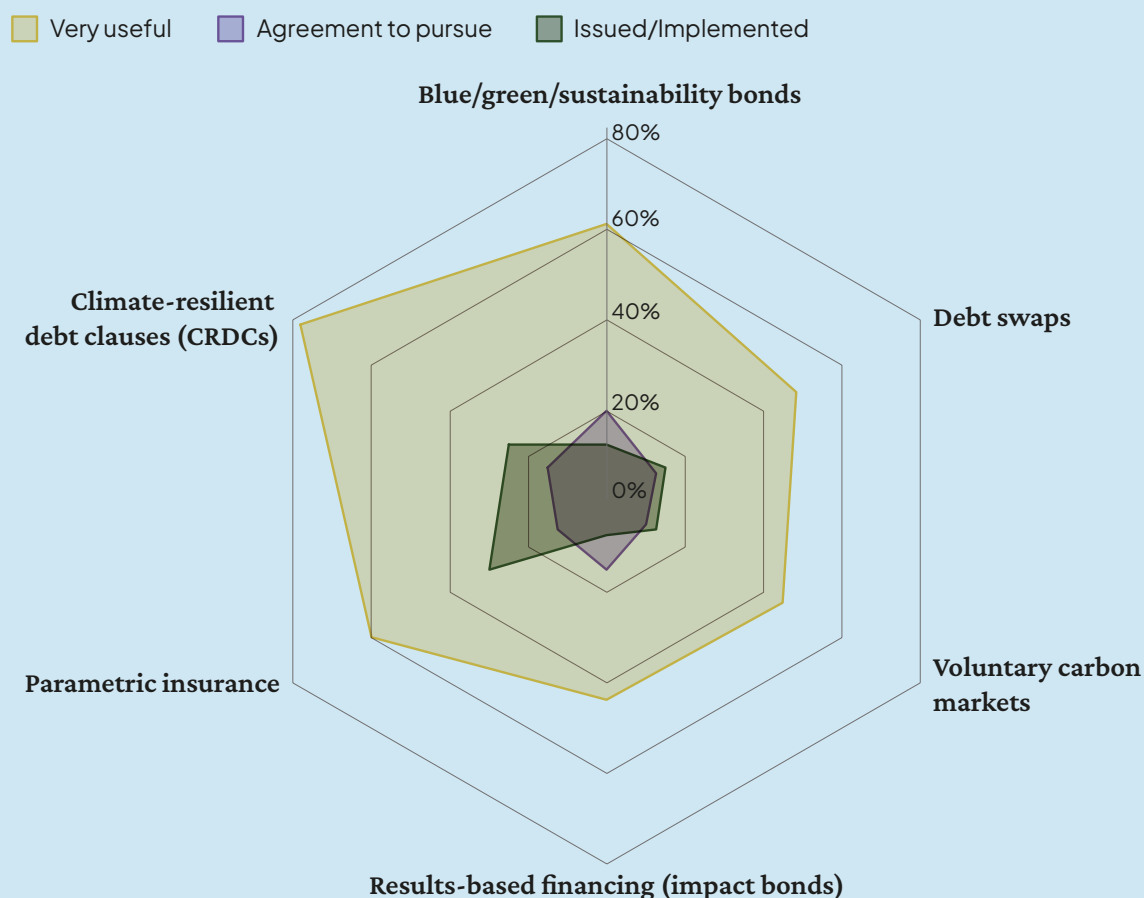
The SIDS Perceptions Survey shows a clear gap between the perceived usefulness of innovative financing instruments and their practical use.

CRDCs are rated the most useful instrument, with 78.1% of respondents considering them *very useful*; followed by blue, green and sustainability linked bonds (61.3%), and parametric insurance (60%). But implementation remains limited. For example, only 15% of respondents report that CRDCs are in advanced discussion stages and just 25% that they have been issued. In practice, CRDCs have been used in just Barbados (in 2018/19), the Bahamas (2022) and Grenada (2015) up to 2024.

There is a similar pattern across blue/green bonds, debt swaps, voluntary carbon markets and results-based financing (impact bonds) – high usefulness ratings contrast with low issuance or operational uptake (Figure 6.6 and Table 6.1), and regional differences reinforce these disparities. Caribbean respondents report the highest implementation levels for both parametric insurance and CRDCs (43%), reflecting the region's better engagement with various risk financing instruments. Twelve Caribbean countries are using insurance coverage provided by the Caribbean Catastrophe Risk Insurance Facility, while 10 Pacific SIDS hold insurance coverage from the Pacific Catastrophe Risk Insurance Company, as of 2025.

Uncertainty is pronounced across all regions and instruments though. Between 35% and 42.5% of respondents answered *don't know or not applicable* to relevant questions, underscoring limited awareness of instruments and the information and capacity constraints shaping diffusion of innovative finance in SIDS.

Figure 6.6 SIDS' views on the utility of innovative financial instruments



Source: Panwar et al. (2026).

Table 6.1 Innovative finance instruments in SIDS

● Yes/implemented/accessible ● No/not implemented ● Partial issuance or planning stage

SIDS	Blue/ green/ thematic bonds	Debt swaps	Voluntary carbon markets	Parametric insurance	CRDCs/ hurricane clauses*
Antigua and Barbuda	●	●	●	●	●
The Bahamas	●	●	●	●	●
Barbados	●	●	●	●	●
Belize	●	●	●	●	●
Cabo Verde	●	●	●	●	●
Comoros	●	●	●	●	●
Dominica	●	●	●	●	●
Dominican Republic	●	●	●	●	●
Fiji	●	●	●	●	●
Grenada	●	●	●	●	●
Guinea-Bissau	●	●	●	●	●
Guyana	●	●	●	●	●
Haiti	●	●	●	●	●
Jamaica	●	●	●	●	●
Kiribati	●	●	●	●	●
The Maldives	●	●	●	●	●
The Marshall Islands	●	●	●	●	●
Mauritius	●	●	●	●	●
Micronesia	●	●	●	●	●
Nauru	●	●	●	●	●
Palau	●	●	●	●	●
Papua New Guinea	●	●	●	●	●
Samoa	●	●	●	●	●

São Tomé & Príncipe	●	●	●	●	●
The Seychelles	●	●	●	●	●
The Solomon Islands	●	●	●	●	●
St. Kitts & Nevis	●	●	●	●	●
St. Lucia	●	●	●	●	●
St. Vincent & Grenadines	●	●	●	●	●
Suriname	●	●	●	●	●
Timor-Leste	●	●	●	●	●
Tonga	●	●	●	●	●
Trinidad & Tobago	●	●	●	●	●
Tuvalu	●	●	●	●	●
Vanuatu	●	●	●	●	●

Notes: *World Bank – International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) or International Development Association (IDA) eligible. Data retrieved: 12 December 2025.

Source: Panwar et al. (2026).

6.2.2 Technical support for SIDS

The ABAS emphasises the importance of technical assistance and capacity development for SIDS, including skills training for the economic participation of youth and technical support for accessing climate finance and other finance mechanisms, digitalisation, data collection and analysis. In the SIDS Perceptions Survey, 93% of respondents rate technical support as *very important* or *extremely important* for their development priorities (Panwar et al., 2026).

But the literature suggests technical support is misaligned currently (Boswell et al., 2024). Much support focuses on climate finance

readiness and compliance, neglecting the capacity areas SIDS prioritise for their ‘resilient prosperity’ such as youth and digital economies and data systems.

Concentration of technical support

Donors have previously channelled technical support to SIDS towards areas that are easily measured and that align with global frameworks. Meanwhile, capacity-building that requires time, institutional depth and social or cultural grounding has received less attention (Atteridge et al., 2020; Haas, 2023; Wilkinson et al., 2025).

For instance, technical support to SIDS has focused especially on access to climate finance and DRR. Readiness programmes,

accreditation processes and compliance systems attract extensive resources, with SIDS assisted in preparing project pipelines and meeting fiduciary requirements (Atteridge et al., 2022; Kaur and Tennant, 2024; Butcher-Gollach, 2015).

While this helps some SIDS secure much-needed climate finance, capacity gains remain shallow because many governments rely on external consultants. Ministries and other government agencies remain dependent on outside expertise rather than building internal systems (Wilkinson et al., 2025). At the same time, the very small size of SIDS administrations means that officials often hold multiple responsibilities, limiting their ability to

absorb short project cycles or consultant-driven interventions (Ismail, 2019; Kaur and Tennant, 2024; Boswell et al., 2024).

Technical support in the development of SIDS ocean governance and blue economy professionals has also increased over recent years. However, external knowledge systems still marginalise local and Indigenous knowledge and perspectives, often reducing these to inputs in externally designed projects rather than respecting them as holistic worldviews with political and cultural dimensions (Nalau et al., 2018).

This limits the meaningful integration of local perspectives and results in sustainability or development indicators that, being designed



Filming Climate Blueprint, Vanuatu, 2025. Photo: RESI/Ben Merker, Merk Films.

in distant and often continental contexts, can lack relevance and applicability to island communities (Strauß et al., 2022; Haas, 2023; Wilkinson et al., 2025). It hampers the effectiveness of outcomes and reduces the agency of island societies (Bordner et al., 2020). Even when labelled ‘locally led’, programmes are frequently donor-driven, hierarchical and reliant on external contractors, thus marginalising local voices and knowledge (Amankwa et al., 2025).

Misalignment of technical assistance

Several areas requiring support receive less attention, and their effects are often shallow, fragmented and poorly aligned with national priorities (Wilkinson et al., 2025). For example, public sector capacity-building is widely discussed as a priority for SIDS, but the results are modest at best. Programmes often overlook deeper structural challenges like brain drain, weak statistical systems and difficulties in regional cooperation (Ismail, 2019; Kaur and Tennant, 2024).

Biodiversity and ecosystem services also remain marginal in technical assistance. There is weak data availability, limited study of regulating services like erosion control and pollination, and little attention to non-economic issues such as land, identity and cultural heritage (Strauß et al., 2022; Balzan et al., 2018; Chandra et al., 2023). Youth and human capital development are underserved in technical assistance programmes too, for instance in creative industries and digital economies where there is potential to diversify economies and create opportunities for youth (Rudge, 2021).

Overall, the design and delivery of technical support in SIDS still gravitates towards areas that are financeable, auditable and consistent

with international regimes, particularly climate finance readiness, oceans governance and disaster response (Atteridge et al., 2020; Haas, 2023). These domains provide measurable outputs and align with donor reporting cycles. In contrast, initiatives that require long-term investment in institutions, culture or social transformation receive less attention partly because they are harder to quantify or to attribute outcomes to donors.

Even when labelled ‘locally led’, programmes are frequently donor-driven, hierarchical and reliant on external contractors.

Undermining sovereignty and local capacities

SIDS governments often view external adaptation funding as essential for survival but also a threat to sovereignty, in that it ties their long-term strategies to donor priorities and frameworks (Bordner et al., 2020). This intersects with administrative burdens because staff in small ministries often spend more time in workshops and reporting than in policy implementation, deepening dependency rather than reducing it (Ismail, 2019; Wilkinson et al., 2025; Kaur and Tennant, 2024).

Additionally, there can be a tension between stated ambitions and practical delivery. While frameworks like the BPOA, Mauritius Strategy for Implementation and SAMOA Pathway emphasise the need for capacity development, technical assistance has historically been delivered through short-term, project-based interventions, often responding to donor priorities and reporting cycles rather than long-term

national capacity-development strategies. Several SIDS report a ‘workshop culture’ that places administrative burdens on small governments, with limited institutionalisation of knowledge once external projects conclude (Panwar et al., 2026).

6.2.3 International diplomacy and political support for SIDS

International diplomacy and political support for SIDS sit at the core of the ABAS, which calls for SIDS to be recognised as equal partners in global governance. This means strengthened negotiating capacities, equitable representation and dedicated institutional platforms across all major UN processes.

In particular, the ABAS urges the international community to give due consideration to SIDS’ specific concerns in decision-making across climate, oceans, international trade and finance. Careful evaluation of these areas shows a system designed to contain SIDS’ demands within non-binding processes, however, rather than bring about the structural reforms islands need.

Political support on oceans and biodiversity

The ABAS highlights oceans and the blue economy as priority pillars for SIDS, calling for enhanced participation in oceans decision-making, strengthened capacity for monitoring and enforcement, and fair benefit-sharing (especially for key areas such as marine genetic resources).

The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the Agreement under the UNCLOS on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity



of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ Agreement) (UN, 2023) have been the primary arenas for translating oceans-related issues that matter to SIDS into international rules. In particular, SIDS and their allies have used the ‘common heritage of humankind’ principle to press for fair benefit-sharing, capacity development and technology transfer that reflect structural constraints in SIDS, as well as for predictable ocean financing mechanisms that do not rely solely on discretionary funding cycles (Vadrot et al., 2022; Haas, 2023).

While SIDS have achieved important victories – notably in the BBNJ Agreement, which explicitly recognises the special circumstances of SIDS and their entitlement to special consideration – challenges remain. Although many development partners

demonstrate symbolic solidarity with SIDS' oceans agenda, structural reforms to lock-in more equitable outcomes are emerging more slowly and unevenly.

For instance, benefit-sharing modalities, technology-transfer mechanisms, funding arrangements and institutional mandates have been left more flexible or less well-defined. One example is the BBNJ Special Fund where key decisions on the scale of assessed contributions from developed countries, governance, banking arrangements and access procedures are still to be established. For SIDS, many of whom were first to ratify, access to adequate and predictable funding will determine whether the BBNJ Agreement delivers genuine equity or perpetuates existing inequalities in ocean governance ([Pouponneau and Thiele, 2026](#)).

Decisions to agree broad principles but postpone key details have often disadvantaged SIDS. This has pushed substantive negotiations into later rule-making phases when SIDS' small delegations, already operating with limited bandwidth, struggle to sustain effective engagement and risk being pressured into less favourable outcomes ([Mendenhall et al., 2023](#); [Tessnow-von Wysocki and Vadrot, 2022](#)). Even where SIDS' positions are broadly supported by – and align with – a critical mass of countries at all development levels, the current failure to conclude a UN Plastics Treaty shows that opposition by just a few countries to more ambitious measures can thwart favourable outcomes for SIDS.

Political support on climate change

The ABAS explicitly calls for efforts to strengthen SIDS' participation and influence in international climate negotiations, in order

to secure ambitious mitigation plans, scaled-up adaptation finance, and effective loss and damage arrangements.

Within the UNFCCC, through AOSIS coordination, SIDS have repeatedly secured key 'wins' for vulnerable countries. Examples include a legally binding international treaty on climate change, agreement to limit global warming to 1.5°C, the setting of an adaptation finance goal, and most recently the establishment of the FRLD. This has all been achieved despite minimal political power, often by forging strategic coalitions with sympathetic partners and non-state actors and by maintaining 'message discipline' across negotiating rooms ([Klöck et al., 2020](#)).

Coalitions have been crucial here, including those with the LDC Group, several Latin American countries and members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) who have aligned with AOSIS voices. Plus the strategic influence of SIDS has been strengthened by deploying moral claims in climate debates ([Betzold, 2010](#); [Bishop and Payne, 2012](#); [Corneloup and Mol, 2014](#); [Campling, 2006](#)).

More recently, this diplomatic strategy has expanded into international courts and tribunals, where SIDS have sought to convert climate vulnerability into legal jurisprudence. In 2024, the Commission of Small Island States on Climate Change and International Law (COSIS), led by Antigua and Barbuda and by Tuvalu, secured an advisory opinion from the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS). This determined that atmospheric greenhouse gases constitute marine pollution and that high-emitting states therefore have legal obligations to prevent, reduce and control such emissions ([ITLOS,](#)

2024). This represents a breakthrough for SIDS, particularly given the centrality of oceans to their economies and cultures, although the absence of enforcement mechanisms limits its practical impact.

Similarly, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) advisory opinion on obligations of states in respect of climate change shows how SIDS have built international coalitions and converted their vulnerability into legal argument to bring about climate justice. Vanuatu's written statement links due diligence and best available science to obligations of cessation, non-repetition and cooperation, grounding the 'special circumstances' of SIDS in treaty and customary law ([Republic of Vanuatu, 2024](#)).

Unless backed by a critical mass of countries, in practice SIDS are acutely vulnerable to the political preferences of much larger, wealthier and more dominant nations.

This view is echoed by several developing countries in their submissions. Most SIDS favour a progressive stance, advancing justice-oriented interpretations of legal obligations and consequences, advocating stringent mitigation obligations and opening the door for the application of secondary responsibility ([Cano Prentice et al., 2025](#)). Most developed countries, on the other hand, stress that existing climate agreements (the Paris Agreement and UNFCCC) are sufficient to establish state responsibility for damage to the climate system. They draw a distinction between offering general expressions of support and making concrete commitments.

SIDS will need to carefully navigate these issues in their future diplomacy ([Banuelos and Tigre, 2025](#)).

The International Maritime Organization (IMO) negotiations on greenhouse gas emissions and carbon pricing are also crucial for SIDS. These aim to regulate transboundary shipping emissions that directly affect SIDS' climate and ocean conservation objectives. SIDS have been particularly concerned with equitable rule design, new mechanisms to tax carbon, capacity support and monitoring of these agreements ([Hurley et al., 2025b](#); [Haas, 2023](#)). However, the recently agreed plan to phase out fossil fuels from the maritime sector by 2050 and introduce the world's first legally binding global carbon price (and a fund for distributing revenues) has since been delayed following pressure from the US Government.

This planned phase out of fossil fuels was seen as a victory for SIDS and an attempt to rebalance power in a system long dominated by the interests of large shipping states and private industry ([Tunagur et al., 2025](#)). The delay shows that, unless backed by a critical mass of countries, in practice SIDS are acutely vulnerable to the political preferences of much larger, wealthier and more dominant nations.

Political support on international trade

The absence of explicit reference to special and differential treatment in international trade in the ABAS (in contrast to the SAMOA Pathway) could signal that SIDS are no longer collectively prioritising broad, general recognition of the SIDS category within the WTO. Instead, SIDS have concentrated their recent efforts on asserting their 'specific circumstances' in highly targeted sectors, such as fisheries and the

sustainable ocean economy, digital trade and e-commerce, and trade facilitation, where engagement is considered likely to yield more tangible benefits.

A persistent challenge for SIDS in advancing their agendas within the WTO and other trade institutions is their limited diplomatic and trade negotiation capacity. For example, over a third of SIDS lack diplomatic representation in Geneva, the centre of international trade negotiations, and those that do are often underrepresented. This makes active participation in negotiations particularly challenging, including defending their sector-specific interests and contributing to discussions on WTO reform.

In fisheries, SIDS lack guaranteed, long-term funding and operational support to monitor small-scale fisheries, implement global sustainability rules and safeguard

livelihoods. This leaves them exposed to obligations that strain their limited resources. Such gaps are exemplified by the Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies, which entered into force in September 2025 and was supported by several SIDS (WTO, 2022). While the Agreement represents a normative shift by disciplining harmful subsidies linked to illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing and overfished stocks, it is anchored in traditional developing-country classifications. Consequently, middle-income SIDS do not automatically benefit from tailored flexibilities, despite the large size of their ocean spaces, their disproportionate exposure to climate shocks, fiscal constraints and high compliance costs.

Although a Fisheries Funding Mechanism exists, its voluntary nature limits predictability and support for long-term capacity-building. Overall, the Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies



Grenada. Photo: Hugh Whyte/Unsplash.

illustrates a broader systemic pattern: SIDS can secure normative acknowledgement of vulnerability in the international arena, yet WTO disciplines fall short of embedding this into legally binding, vulnerability-based differentiation in trade rules.

SIDS also face significant constraints in digital trade and e-commerce. Insufficient support for infrastructure, regulatory frameworks and technical capacity limits their ability to participate fully in global digital markets and diversify their service economies. Compared to developed countries, SIDS have lower adoption of e-commerce regulations (78% versus 98%) but high digital infrastructure costs, limited secure servers and uneven broadband coverage, which together hinder digital engagement. Many SIDS maintain only basic regulatory frameworks focused on consumer protection, privacy and trust, rather than comprehensive, trade-enabling e-commerce legislation ([UNCTAD, 2024a](#) and [2025](#)).

Micro, small and medium enterprises face additional barriers in accessing digital markets and therefore need targeted capacity-building and training. While the WTO e-commerce moratorium has facilitated digital trade growth, some SIDS are concerned about potential impacts on domestic revenue and stress the importance of preserving policy space for national digital taxation and regulation. To address these challenges, SIDS have called for sustained technical, financial and training support, including a joint database on capacity-building programmes and digital infrastructure financing, to bridge the digital divide and enable their economies to fully benefit from digital trade.

Regarding trade facilitation and technical standards, SIDS face weak implementation support, limited flexibility and high compliance costs. Global mechanisms do not adequately account for their small administrative capacities or high transport costs.

The central question is not how to integrate SIDS into global trade – they are already among the most open economies in the world – but how to make trade work for their sustainable development.

Across fisheries, digital trade and e-commerce, and trade facilitation, predictable vulnerability-focused assistance and legally recognised flexibilities are missing that align WTO obligations with the structural realities of SIDS. Instead, they are left to navigate trade rules with generic, one-size-fits-all provisions.

Beyond WTO negotiations, the central question is not how to integrate SIDS into global trade – they are already among the most open economies in the world – but how to make trade work for their sustainable development. They must overcome reliance on a narrow range of sectors and reduce persistent trade deficits, which would strengthen their resilience to external shocks that mostly transmit through the balance of payments.

Economic diversification – including expanding into higher value-added activities and diversifying trade partners beyond traditional markets – has become even more urgent in the current geopolitical

landscape where SIDS' partners are increasingly emphasising 'self-sufficiency'. Practical support for SIDS to achieve this self-sufficiency remains elusive though. For example, the ABAS highlights the need for international support to build 'productive capacities' as the foundation for economic diversification. While UNCTAD has developed a dedicated programme to support productive capacity development in SIDS ([UNCTAD, 2024b](#)), its scope is limited by insufficient backing from international financial institutions and development partners.

International support for data and technology transfer for SIDS

The ABAS positions data, digitalisation, innovation and technology as enablers for sustainable development, resilience and prosperity in SIDS.

These 'means of implementation' are framed in the ABAS as distinct but fundamentally interconnected. Strengthening data collection, analysis and use goes hand in hand with enhancing science, technology, innovation and digitalisation. For instance, the ABAS highlights that strengthening national data infrastructure through digitalisation would help integrate data into development planning and enhance the statistical capacity of SIDS ([UN-OHRLLS, 2024](#); [UNDP, 2024a](#)).

Data are key to the structural, financial and technological transformation necessary to realise the 2030 Agenda, to implement the ABAS and to support the Paris Agreement ([UNDP, 2024b](#)). However, SIDS have the lowest data availability of all world regions for measuring progress towards the SDGs, with just 66% of data coverage in 2022

compared with Latin America at 71% and sub-Saharan Africa at 87% ([Hambleton and Jeyaseelan, 2024](#)).

This lack of data undermines SIDS' efforts to tackle the climate crisis. They are at the forefront of climate change, which makes robust monitoring and design of data-driven climate strategies even more urgent ([UNDP, 2024b](#)). However, SIDS face significant challenges in data collection and analysis, and in building technical and institutional capacity in this area, partly due to their structural characteristics. Collecting data across isolated islands, vast ocean spaces and highly dispersed yet small populations in contexts of limited institutional capacity and infrastructure is very difficult. And this, in turn, constrains effective responses to climate and disaster events ([UNDP, 2024b](#)). This includes hazard and vulnerability assessments and the need to map risks and environmental impacts ([UN DESA and UNDRR, 2022](#)).

Climate change also negatively impacts human health yet a lack of data collection and monitoring on climate-health linkages means that healthcare systems are not climate-ready in SIDS. The 2025 *Lancet Countdown* report emphasises that low data availability is a key challenge in measuring and monitoring climate change and health impacts in SIDS ([Gordon-Strachan et al., 2025](#)). Meanwhile, the 2024 report shows that only five (8%) of 59 countries, states and territories classified as UN member and associate-member SIDS have developed national health and climate strategies or plans; only nine (15%) have carried out climate and health vulnerability assessments; and only six (10%) have surveillance systems that integrate meteorological parameters with health ([Gordon-Strachan et al., 2025](#)).

The ABAS frames digitalisation as a strategic pillar of resilience and economic transformation. It calls for digital solutions to overcome the adverse impacts of remoteness and other structural constraints, focusing on ‘inclusive digital societies’ that encompass digital and financial literacy and skills (UNDP, 2024a). But SIDS are unable to benefit from economies of scale amid the global push for digital transformation (Hambleton and Jeyaseelan, 2024). This affects their ability to leverage new technologies to develop climate-resilient sectors, such as renewable energy, energy efficiency, sustainable transport, climate-resilient infrastructure, blue economy and ocean-based sectors, land and forestry, knowledge-based economies and circular economies (Mohan, 2024).

Closing SIDS’ capacity, data and technology gaps is essential so they can derive the maximum possible benefit from international frameworks such as the BBNJ Agreement. Marine technology transfer is key for its implementation; however, scientific and technology gaps are currently impeding SIDS’ ability to participate in ocean science activities (Harden-Davis and Snelgrove, 2020; Harden-Davis et al., 2022). For example, they lack access to deep ocean scientific technology, including for monitoring, control and surveillance in the long term (Harden-Davis et al., 2022), and therefore they are unable to participate in marine research and development to the same extent as other countries (Hurley et al., 2025b). Currently, only four of the 13,000+ patents associated with marine genetic sequences are from institutions located in SIDS (Blasiak et al., 2018).

6.3 Evidence and knowledge gaps

6.3.1 Data gaps and fragmented donor support

The international community sponsors numerous policies and provides technical support to help SIDS fill data, digital and technology gaps. Initiatives include the IMF’s Data Gaps Initiative, the UN’s and the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme’s (SPREP) INFORM Project, the Pacific Digital Economy Programme and various climate-information programmes in the Pacific. These aim to strengthen national data systems, improve access to environmental and meteorological information and enhance the digital infrastructure needed for evidence-based planning (Hambleton and Jeyaseelan, 2024).

However, an uncoordinated donor-led and project-based culture often leads to disparate and disconnected information and data that are not embedded in local data systems (UN DESA and UNDRR, 2022). Capacity-building and technology-transfer efforts to help SIDS have been scrutinised for not being sustained over time (Harden-Davis et al., 2022).

An uncoordinated donor-led and project-based culture often leads to disparate and disconnected information and data.

Rather than resolve data challenges, this culture can exacerbate data-driven inequity. Evidence suggests that national statistical capacities of SIDS were among the lowest of all world regions in 2022 (Hambleton and

Jeyaseelan, 2024) and these were broadly equivalent to the data capacity of sub-Saharan Africa. This similarity exists despite the very different economic profiles of these country groups: where sub-Saharan African countries are classified as low and lower-middle income, SIDS are classified as upper/high income. For SIDS, their data capacity constraints are closely associated with ‘country smallness’ measured by population size (Hambleton and Jeyaseelan, 2024).

High, upfront capital requirements are a primary bottleneck for investment in data and statistical systems, digitalisation and new technologies, which are often unaffordable for many SIDS (AOSIS, 1998; Sindico et al., 2024; Harden Davis and Snelgrove, 2020; Bishop et al., 2023). In particular, the ABAS focuses on technology transfer related to the energy transition where significant finance needs to be mobilised (Sindico et al., 2024).

6.3.2 The SIDS Centre of Excellence

To address these challenges, the ABAS calls for international support to establish a SIDS Centre of Excellence (UN-OHRLLS, 2024), using a ‘by SIDS, for SIDS’ model. It proposes four pillars that align with SIDS’ priority needs: 1) a SIDS Global Data Hub, 2) an Island Investment Forum, 3) a Technology and Innovation Mechanism and 4) a Debt Sustainability Support Service (UN, 2025b).

In particular, the Global Data Hub aims to develop and strengthen the institutional and technical capacity of SIDS by establishing a comprehensive repository for data on SIDS. This includes increased access to new and relevant data sources, enabling technologies, innovative dashboards and visualisation

tools, and capacity-building mechanisms across SIDS’ priority areas (oceans, climate economy through tourism and trade, and well-being and health). Meanwhile the Debt Sustainability Support Service has been designed to provide four primary layers of support to SIDS, including technical and legal support for debt restructuring, support to lower the cost of borrowing through mechanisms such as guarantees, support for building financial resilience through instruments such as CRDCs and parametric insurance, and other advisory support (Bharadwaj, 2024).

As operationalisation of the Centre of Excellence progresses in 2026, the extent to which development partners align with and support SIDS-led efforts such as this – both technically and financially – will test their willingness to shift away from more traditional approaches.



The Maldives. Photo: Shaah Shahidh/Unsplash.

6.4 Emerging issues

SIDS hold limited structural power in the international political arena yet they have effectively adopted an entrepreneurial, intellectual and environmental leadership strategy. They have also successfully deployed moral claims to secure political support in various international processes ([Cornelop and Mol, 2014](#)).

At the same time, however, political support for SIDS from larger states is increasingly shaped by short-term geopolitical or diplomatic considerations (e.g. securing votes in multilateral forums or support for temporary seats on the UN Security Council), rather than by sustained commitments to the long-term sustainable development and resilience of SIDS.

Partnerships are also becoming increasingly (and overtly) transactional. Take aid programmes in the Pacific, for instance, where US, Australian and Chinese assistance has become driven by short-term diplomatic agendas ([Hanson, 2009](#); [Waqavakatoga et al., 2024](#)). These practices allow partners to express symbolic solidarity with SIDS but they undermine the creation of deep, structural partnerships called for in successive SIDS action plans.

Other global trends and institutional changes are of relevance to SIDS too.

6.4.1 Increasing marginalisation within development and climate finance regimes

By 2030, up to 12 SIDS could lose eligibility for ODA as they reach high-income status. This includes Palau, Nauru, St. Lucia and

Montserrat in the immediate term, where aid represents 38% of these countries' external financial flows, on average ([OECD, 2024](#)). Without substantial reform to aid eligibility frameworks, many SIDS face a 'graduation cliff edge' – losing access to development finance and much climate finance – just as climate and disaster risks intensify. For example, Antigua and Barbuda graduated from ODA eligibility in 2022, but the country remains highly vulnerable to climate shocks and is struggling with an unsustainable external debt burden ([Robinson, 2024](#)).

Efforts to operationalise the UN MVI in resource allocation are slowly gaining traction (see section 6.2.1), but they remain largely symbolic to date and donors are reluctant to support wholesale reform of the development and climate finance architecture. Without comprehensive reform of the ODA system, though, SIDS are likely to be further marginalised from the concessional financing they need over the ten-year 'sprint' of the ABAS. In the context of rising debt risks, this could tip several SIDS into debt distress.

6.4.2 Declines in aid and shifts in donor preferences

Development aid declined by 7% between 2023 and 2024 and the OECD has reported a fall of up to 17% in 2025 relative to 2024 levels ([OECD, n.d.](#)). It projects further declines over the next few years.

With aid budgets increasingly squeezed, development and foreign affairs ministries are facing hard choices about how to direct scarce public aid resources. Within Europe, more 'transactional' narratives on aid are emerging – ones emphasising security, defence, migration

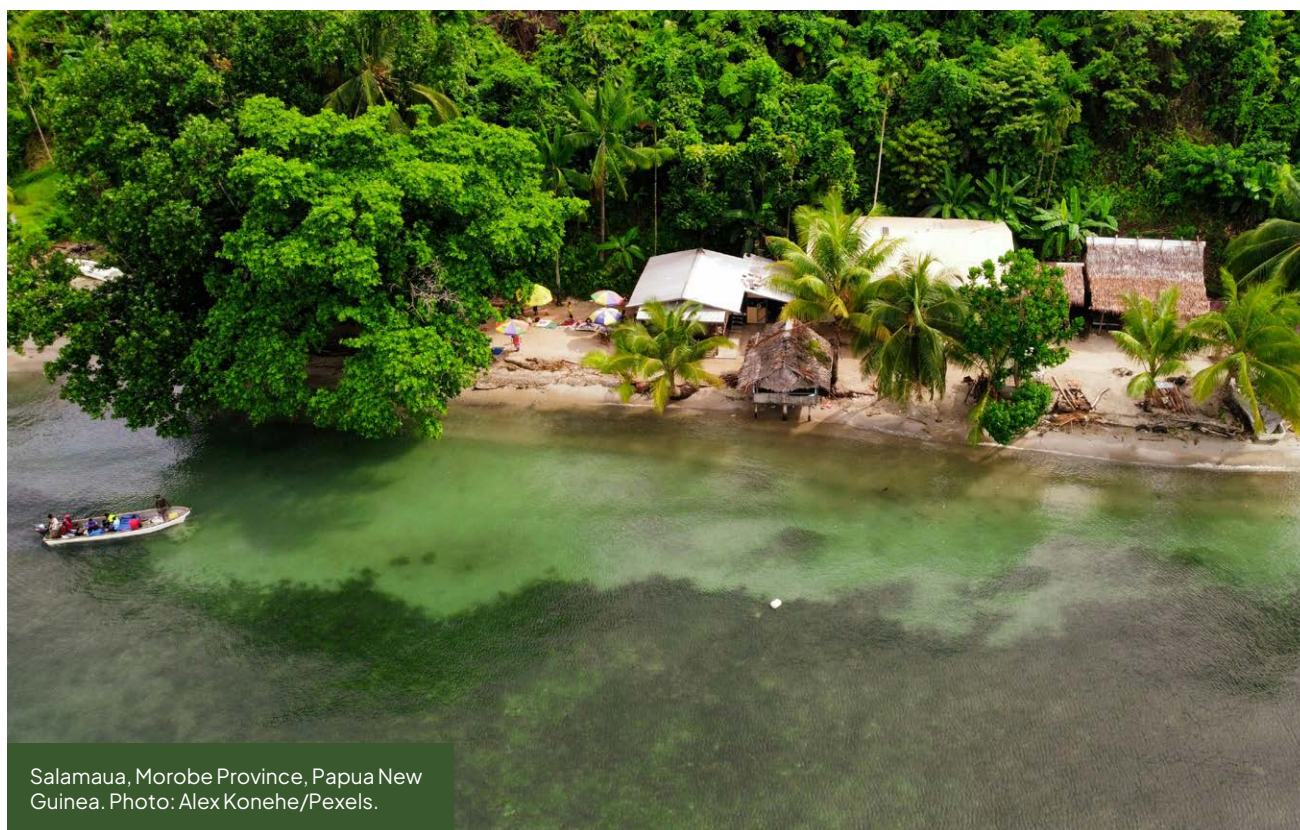
and competitiveness (Kumar et al., 2025). Public and political support for aid to respond to humanitarian crises and reduce poverty continues, but the moral argument for aid is under significant pressure. There is, however, recognition of the need to spend more on a stable climate (Kumar et al., 2025).

For some SIDS, a future strategic realignment in these directions represents an opportunity to leverage new development and climate finance flows. But this may marginalise some development areas, such as support for democracy promotion and the inclusion of minority groups (Kumar et al., 2025). It may also lead to higher aid concentration, leaving some SIDS with fewer partnerships as support bypasses small, isolated economies with limited strategic value. This will affect SIDS' political leverage with their development partners.

Meanwhile, a shift in ODA towards the security, migration and competitiveness agendas changes the nature of SIDS' relationships with their development partners. It may also increase the proportion of financing delivered as loans, which heightens debt vulnerabilities.

The moral argument for aid is under significant pressure.

These dynamics are already leading to a readjustment/reorientation of many SIDS' strategic partnerships, with greater political attention being placed on South–South relationships, for instance. In many SIDS, these partnerships are being framed as a necessity in aid-dependent territories (Sou and Day, 2025).



Salamaua, Morobe Province, Papua New Guinea. Photo: Alex Konehe/Pexels.

The SIDS Perceptions Survey shows that South–South cooperation flows (which are increasing, particularly from China) are highly valued by SIDS. Respondents rank China highest across all regions, but questions remain around the extent to which China's focus on infrastructure-based development could (adversely) impact local climate resilience and lead to key assets being under foreign ownership ([Panwar et al., 2026](#)).

The shortfall in aid flows from traditional donors is unlikely to be completely filled by partners from the Global South and Gulf States in the short-term, however. And this leaves many SIDS vulnerable to changing donor preferences over which they ultimately have no control. Gaining strength here will be critical for SIDS to improve the effectiveness of development cooperation, ensuring that solutions designed elsewhere are adapted to their Small Island context.

6.4.3 Bridging the finance-to-resilience gap

Despite growing global awareness that investing in climate and nature resilience is a strategic investment, financial flows to SIDS do not yet adequately focus on resilience ([Panwar and Wilkinson, 2024](#)). Crucially, SIDS have highlighted that debt sustainability assessments carried out by the IMF and World Bank and sovereign 'creditworthiness' assessments carried out by CRAs do not account for the positive impacts on long-term growth and resilience of investing in resilient infrastructure and the protection of natural capital.

Slowly, this deficiency is being corrected. The Sevilla Commitment outcome document from the Fourth UN Financing for

Development Conference invites relevant stakeholders to better take into account investments in resilience, nature protection and productive capacity, and to reflect their impact on long-term growth and sustainable development. This includes by capturing the asset side (the value created by those investments) and using a longer-term perspective ([UN, 2025a](#)). The IMF and World Bank are also reviewing their methodologies to explore how to capture climate risks and nature-related investments in their debt sustainability assessments. Ideally, these developments will help SIDS secure improved sovereign credit ratings and lower borrowing costs.

As this work continues, new methodological approaches must take into account the specific characteristics of SIDS and, crucially, the returns on investing in blue natural capital assets.

6.4.4 Implementation of the BBNJ Agreement and implications for SIDS

The BBNJ Agreement provides for 'adequate, accessible, new and additional and predictable financial resources' to be made available to support implementation ([UN, 2023: Art. 52, para. 3](#)). It will move from the implementation phase in 2026 to the design of various financial mechanisms, including a Special Fund, assessed contributions, voluntary contributions, benefit-sharing from marine genetic resources and digital sequence information.

For SIDS, several of these financial mechanisms hold promise for new funding, capacity-building and technology transfer. It is envisaged that the Special Fund, in

particular, will assist states with capacity-building, implementation, Indigenous and local community involvement, consultations and national/sub-regional programmes. Similarly, if benefit-sharing from marine genetic resources is operationalised, SIDS may gain new revenue streams and access to marine innovation ecosystems.

There are continued risks for SIDS though. The institutional design of the Special Fund is unresolved and therefore it remains to be seen whether this mechanism can deliver equitably for SIDS. The ‘benefits’ from marine genetic resources and digital sequence information may also accrue over long time horizons, and SIDS may face competition with larger states or private actors. The institutional roll-out of the BBNJ Agreement over the next few years represents a critical test of the international community’s support for SIDS, therefore.

6.5 Looking ahead

There has been important political recognition of SIDS’ special case for sustainable development, but there is still a gap between rhetorical solidarity and practical application via structural, predictable and equitable support across various dimensions. Translating political declarations into binding financial mechanisms for sustained, predictable and fair support for SIDS is challenging.

Similarly, procedural inclusion in international political processes has not necessarily led to agenda control or better outcomes for SIDS. Overall, these countries still face systemic barriers across finance, political inclusion,

international trade, and access to data and new technologies that limit their ability to achieve the ambitions of the ABAS.

There are signs of progress, such as growing momentum to integrate vulnerability into concessional finance decisions, climate diplomacy wins and new institutional mechanisms like the FRLD. But these developments fall short of the scale, depth and speed of transformation needed by SIDS to navigate the volatile global context.

There is still a gap between rhetorical solidarity and practical application via structural, predictable and equitable support.

This means SIDS are at a critical juncture – their viability is threatened by accelerating climate change, rising geopolitical competition and a backlash against globalisation, which is straining the existing liberal international order and drawing political attention away from their predicament.

SIDS have successfully exercised moral leadership on the international stage, particularly around climate change, and they have forged powerful strategic alliances with other country groups and stakeholders. However, this approach may falter as different countries face pressure to adjust and adapt their political positions and alliances due to rising geopolitical tensions and major power competition. SIDS’ unity will become more important – but potentially more challenging – than ever.



Climate Blueprint: Barbados film preview, London, 2025. Photo: RESI/Sylvie Pope Photography.

SIDS' own assessments of their development partners offer critical insight into how island nations interpret 'meaningful' solidarity in practice. This includes access to adequate and predictable concessional finance based on recognition of their unique vulnerabilities, simplified climate finance, alignment with national priorities and an appreciation of sustained capacity development to embed skills in local people and institutions.

But without decisive reforms to the global financing architecture, genuine inclusion of SIDS in global rule-making

and enhanced efforts to build robust local systems, many islands risk further marginalisation at the very moment their vulnerabilities intensify. Advancing from symbolic to structural solidarity is not simply an aspirational goal, therefore. It is an urgent prerequisite for resilient prosperity in SIDS and it requires much more than incremental changes. The ten-year 'sprint' of the ABAS will test whether the international community can make a meaningful shift towards partnership models that are truly commensurate with SIDS' needs and rights.

7. CONCLUSIONS: THE SIDS AGENDA IN A 'SELF-HELP' WORLD

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When stakeholders reconvene at the next Small Island Developing States (SIDS) Future Forum in 2028, we will be almost half-way through the Antigua and Barbuda Agenda for SIDS (ABAS) (UN-OHRLLS, 2024), a 10-year programme of action agreed at the Fourth United Nations (UN) SIDS Conference. For some observers, a key marker of success in the ABAS process is that, by 2034, a dedicated UN SIDS conference and decennial agenda may not be needed. This is an attractive idea. It implies, positively, that fundamental solutions to the development problems of SIDS will have been discovered and that a reinvigorated multilateral system will be meeting their collective needs.

But there is a negative reading, too. As foreshadowed in the Introduction to *The state of SIDS report 2026* (SSR2026), the special circumstances of SIDS may be considered insufficiently special to warrant a distinct programme of international support. The wider process of multilateral reform – as encompassed in the ‘UN80’ cost-cutting and streamlining agenda – may reinforce fatigue with mega-conferences, negotiated programmes of action, and decade-

long implementation and benchmarking processes. A more fragmented multilateralism, then, may not have the capacity to anchor distinct agendas for specific state groupings like SIDS.

Both these scenarios are outliers though. Most likely, multilateralism will stumble on alongside geopolitical change, but it will alter and evolve in ways that are hard to predict. By the early 2030s, and with the pace of change accelerating, the SIDS stakeholder community will most likely be taking stock of the ABAS era and turning their attention towards a ‘SIDS5’ and a renewed programme of action.

There is a simple reason for this: in the coming years the challenges facing SIDS will intensify not abate, and commensurate solutions will need to be found no matter how well the ABAS is implemented.

Here, we outline some new insights from both the most recent SIDS Future Forum in 2026 and the SSR2026, mapping out short- and medium-term staging posts as we move towards the next Future Forum and the middle of the ABAS era.





SIDS Future Forum 2026. Photo: Wilton Park.

7.1 Towards the SIDS Future Forum 2028: a biennial ‘Davos for SIDS’?

The SIDS Future Forum is helping to facilitate a medium-to-long-term discussion that exists outside of, but attends to, the cut and thrust of multilateral negotiations and policy formation (Wilton Park, 2026). Its seeds were planted the year before SIDS4, at a meeting on financing for resilience, where there was a sense that a novel space was needed parallel to official processes to explore new partnerships and ideas. The Directors of the Resilient and Sustainable Islands Initiative (RESI) participating at that meeting only half-seriously described this as a ‘Davos for SIDS’. Yet this notion stuck in the final meeting report (Wilton Park, 2023) and it became cemented in the minds of several SIDS stakeholders, who have reminded us of it at various moments since.

By early 2024, RESI had a plan: to work closely with partners – notably the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office’s (FCDO) SIDS Hub; the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs’ (UNDESA) SIDS Unit; the UN Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States (UN-OHRLLS); the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS); and various SIDS governments – to host the first SIDS Future Forum in New York in March 2024.

RESI took inspiration from the platform that the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) already had with their own ‘Future Forum’ adjacent to the formal UN process. The first SIDS Future Forum instigated critical conversations immediately before SIDS4 and acted as proof of concept. We subsequently determined that a key aspect of the support RESI offers to stakeholders

is this convening function, but it needs to be part of what we term a ‘new knowledge architecture’ to assist the wider process of advancing the ABAS (Bishop et al., 2024). So, the SIDS Future Forum consciously dovetails with this SSR2026 plus other elements of RESI’s work, like the SIDS Global Leadership training course, the ‘Small islands, big picture’ podcast and the Climate Blueprint film series (see Box 7.1).

Between now and 2034, RESI hopes to convene multiple SIDS Future Forums and write accompanying editions of *The state of SIDS report* for each. RESI’s role and the purpose of the report is to improve the information environment in which these stakeholders operate, and, in doing so, to address some of the prevailing evidence gaps, data asymmetries and institutional memory constraints faced by all. Put more simply, RESI can help everyone pause,

take a step back, absorb some distilled knowledge, and think about the bigger picture to generate new ideas and strategies collaboratively. So, although the shorthand of a ‘Davos for SIDS’ probably does not adequately capture what the SIDS Future Forum is about, it does seem to offer a space outside of formal processes where stakeholders can engage and find a measure of consensus on the full spectrum of global issues affecting the SIDS agenda. For that reason, and until we can think of a better description, we are happy to adopt the mantle and run with it.

RESI can help everyone pause, take a step back, absorb some distilled knowledge, and think about the bigger picture to generate new ideas and strategies collaboratively.

Box 7.1 RESI and SIDS resources

- Resilient and Sustainable Islands Initiative (RESI): www.resi-initiative.org
- SIDS Future Forum: <https://odi.org/en/events/sids-future-forum-2026-shaping-the-future-of-small-island-developing-states/>
- SIDS Global Leadership training course: <https://odi.org/en/about/our-work/resilient-islands/call-for-nominations-certificate-in-advanced-knowledge-for-sids-global-leadership/>
- ‘Small islands, big picture’ podcast: <https://odi.org/en/about/our-work/small-islands-big-picture-podcast/>
- Climate Blueprint film series: www.climate-blueprint.tv
- Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS): <https://www.aosis.org/>
- Antigua and Barbuda Agenda for SIDS (ABAS): <https://www.un.org/ohrlls/sites/www.un.org.ohrlls/files/abas-booklet.pdf>

Having now convened two SIDS Future Forums, this space for discussion needs to be institutionalised to help shape short- and long-term priorities, strengthen collective agency and ensure that SIDS continue to define the terms of their engagement in a rapidly evolving global order (Bishop et al., 2025). Indeed, the SIDS Future Forum is uniquely capable of convening political leaders, academic and technical experts, donors and development partners to generate ideas, coordinate responses and sustain collective voice in a fragmenting multilateral system away from the daily pressures of that system. This is especially important given the uneven institutionalisation of SIDS cooperation beyond negotiation spaces, and the need for deeper and more continuous dialogue across regions, issues and levels of governance.

The SIDS Future Forum is not simply for advocacy, but for thinking through why and how contemporary dynamics are unfolding and what they mean for SIDS agendas. As we discuss throughout the SSR2026, there is growing pushback against the idea of the SIDS ‘special case’ to the extent it may no longer be a universally accepted premise. Implicit in the Future Forum agenda, therefore, is an attempt to support the status quo.

Contextually, the multilateral order that has provided space for SIDS advocacy is fragmenting in numerous ways: through greater geopolitical tension and military conflict, declining economic openness and reshoring of supply chains, reduced development cooperation and international aid, and intensifying climate change and potential overshoot. This amplifies the urgency felt by SIDS and encompassed

in the idea that the ABAS requires a ‘10-year sprint’ as the planet breaches critical thresholds and tipping points.

Central to this endeavour, and as discussed in the Introduction to this SSR2026, is a need to defend the SIDS special case while generating new stories and advocacy strategies to do so. This thinking can only really emerge from a sustained process of dialogue, and RESI’s modest but fundamental contribution is to provide an architecture – as embodied by *The state of SIDS report* and the SIDS Future Forum – to inform this dialogue with evidence, to nudge conversations at key moments and to distil new stories from the many concurrent discussions taking place.

7.2 Synthesis of findings

So, what conversations did take place at the SIDS Future Forum 2026, how do they reflect the narratives in the substantive chapters of the SSR2026, and which key insights can we distil into broader lines of thinking?

7.2.1 Resilient economies

The first thematic chapter of the SSR2026 elaborates an agenda to move SIDS economies from short-term survival to long-term resilience and prosperity. This agenda recognises persistent structural challenges (e.g. high trade costs, narrow economic bases and vulnerability to external shocks) while also engaging in integrated, cross-sectoral planning to capitalise on ocean-based sectors, sustainable tourism, aquaculture, agriculture, digital services and the creative economy.



Meaningful resilience cannot truly be developed via a succession of piecemeal and isolated projects. Rather, SIDS need systematic interventions that connect initiatives into durable economic architectures – supported by tools such as the UN Conference on Trade and Development’s Productive Capacities Index (PCI) – that can overcome structural and institutional barriers to progress. And all the while ensuring that these frameworks genuinely reflect the economic realities facing SIDS in a changing global context.

Advocacy must move beyond incrementalism towards clear prescriptions for political leaders and development partners.

Consequently, building long-term resilience requires financing and governance reform – encompassing vulnerability-based

finance, digital leadership and stronger integration of Indigenous knowledge. But it also requires a fundamental shift away from extractive models of development that generate value through the depletion of natural capital and the invisible labour of communities, including care work and local environmental stewardship that are uncared and unpaid.

There is, then, a need to rethink diversification – within sectors, beyond traditional metrics of growth, centring climate resilience (Mohan, 2024). And we need to ensure that new development pathways enhance not undermine quality of life.

SIDS face increasing external pressure to exploit ocean resources, which underscores the need for more assertive, evidence-based advocacy. This advocacy must move beyond incrementalism towards clear prescriptions for political leaders and development partners, including where funding should be directed in an era of rapid change.

7.2.2 Safer, healthier and more equitable societies

Achieving resilient social prosperity in SIDS demands that deep-rooted inequalities are addressed and that social foundations are strengthened, including in health and educational systems, social protection and community well-being.

Again, intersecting systems are placed under heavy pressure by the centrality of care in sustaining families, in reproducing economies and in nurturing societies, alongside persistent challenges of gender inequality, youth unemployment, out-migration and demographic change. This applies to constrained labour markets through to public services, food provisioning and healthcare.

People of Vanuatu, polaroid scans, 2025.
Photo: RESI/Ben Merker, Merk Films.



These interconnected systems also face climate and geopolitical disruption: the health of soils and the health of people underpin the health of society at large (Rezaei et al., 2026). There is a compelling need, therefore, for integrated and multisectoral approaches that link social policy with economic and environmental objectives, plus more inclusive governance, stronger institutions and better data to inform policy.

The pursuit of resilient and flourishing SIDS societies is fundamentally inhibited by deepening inequalities of all kinds.

Community-level practices and informal systems are also crucial (and likewise undervalued) in maintaining social cohesion. The pursuit of resilient and flourishing SIDS societies is fundamentally inhibited by deepening inequalities of all kinds though, alongside growing poverty and exclusion (Panwar et al., 2024).

These softer ‘social’ issues represent the micro-foundation of development in SIDS; however, they rarely feature in global SIDS policy debates, which instead tend to focus on macro-structural issues around financing and so on. They also potentially provide powerful justification for defending the SIDS special case, particularly as they intersect with gender, healthcare, food systems and social protection in ways that expose populations to shocks – and, in theory, mediate the effect of those shocks.

Central to this is the care economy, which sustains households and communities yet remains underacknowledged in policy

and economic data. Also important are broader forms of extraction that draw on and deplete civil society, community resilience and goodwill. Challenges such as gender-based violence, food insecurity and youth marginalisation are compounded by global economic pressures, including the reorientation of aid towards security and defence. This is further eroding support for social systems.

To address these issues, integrated, multisectoral and intersectional strategies are needed that link individual experiences to structural dynamics, supported by stronger political commitment, improved governance and investment in social protection. And care work must be recognised and redistributed as well.

In line with broader arguments in the SSR2026, Chapter 3 points to the need for better data and evidence – to close critical gaps and show that interventions centred on women and marginalised groups produce better outcomes. This will strengthen the case for SIDS-specific approaches within an evolving international order.

7.2.3 Building a secure future

The future security of SIDS is a systems challenge, whereby failures in one system can cascade across entire economies due to spatial concentration and limited redundancy. Consequently, resilience depends on coordinated system-wide solutions. For example, to achieve reliable and affordable energy transitions, improved water management, climate-resilient infrastructure and enhanced connectivity to reduce costs and vulnerabilities, SIDS need stronger state capacity, regulatory reform, and long-term

planning and investment. And they must also be able to leverage new technologies and partnerships. These are not only technical challenges, but social and political ones too: past decisions and institutional constraints can ‘lock-in’ suboptimal systems, and overcoming them requires deliberate, coordinated transformation by committed leaders and nimble governing systems.

There is, more than ever, a need to move beyond fragmented, project-based approaches towards more integrated investment packages that focus on reliability, affordability and resilience (instead of binary choices such as renewables versus fossil fuels). At the same time, persistent barriers – grid monopolies, regulatory constraints, financing challenges and low state capacity, for instance – highlight the importance of governance reform and long-term planning, plus efforts to mitigate the risks of misguided sunk cost investments that lock-in future systems which may rapidly become obsolete.

Past decisions and institutional constraints can ‘lock-in’ suboptimal systems, and overcoming them requires deliberate, coordinated transformation by committed leaders and nimble governing systems.

Water security, transport connectivity and climate-resilient infrastructure underscore the need for integrated technological, ecological and community-based solutions that also address political and social dimensions such as public willingness to pay and distributional impacts too. In line with the core contentions of the SSR2026,

this systemic perspective reinforces both the distinctiveness of SIDS' vulnerabilities and the need for evidence-based, forward-looking strategies to navigate structural transformation.

7.2.4 Environmental protection and planetary sustainability

It is impossible to separate questions around environmental sustainability from the wider SIDS development agenda. SIDS face disproportionate exposure to accelerating climate change and at the same time are custodians of globally significant biodiversity and ocean ecosystems.

Defending the SIDS special case means reframing their environmental role in terms of planetary value, moving narratives of vulnerability to assertive arguments about global loss and responsibility.

Again, integrated systemic approaches are essential here. Strategies are needed that link climate action, disaster risk reduction and biodiversity conservation, using approaches such as nature-based solutions, ecosystem management and early warning systems, all while ensuring that global frameworks and agreements support rather than undermine the interests of SIDS. Implementation challenges – including limited access to finance, severe data gaps and capacity constraints – are daunting though (Shah and Kelman, 2024). And running alongside this is a fear that external actors may capture the benefits of environmental initiatives, meaning we also need more equitable governance,

stronger local participation and greater recognition of SIDS' global value in sustaining planetary systems.

The global community must better understand the vital role that SIDS play, and have always played, as norm entrepreneurs shaping international frameworks and legal processes on climate justice, ocean governance, environmental protection, and loss and damage (Wilkinson et al., 2022; Pangelinan and Wilkinson, 2025; Wilkinson and Gmeiner, 2025; Marinescu and Bishop, 2026). Key to this is emphasising the risks of things like ocean-grabbing and greenwashing that can ensue from agreements and processes that facilitate, rather than inhibit, the problems they claim to solve.

Well-functioning ecosystems are not only environmental assets, but a first line of defence for SIDS with far-reaching implications: their degradation represents a net loss for humanity as a whole. In this sense, defending the SIDS special case means reframing their environmental role in terms of planetary value, moving narratives of vulnerability to assertive arguments about global loss and responsibility as we overshoot climate thresholds.

7.2.5 Means of implementation

Across all of these areas, the central constraint remains implementation. This is a perennial challenge, of course, but even in the two years since the promulgation of the ABAS, it has been exacerbated by the way development assistance has become more scarce, politicised and misaligned with SIDS' priorities.

Access to concessional finance is a cornerstone issue. SIDS face worsening

fiscal constraints due to repeated shocks, heavy indebtedness, declining donor support and reliance on excessively high-cost borrowing, even as emerging tools such as the Multidimensional Vulnerability Index (MVI) begin to challenge the traditional dominance of allocation systems based solely on gross national income (GNI) (Hurley et al., 2024, 2025a and 2025b).

While there is growing interest in innovative financing instruments, uptake has been limited, often due to donor-driven design and questions of scalability. This highlights the need for more appropriate and accessible mechanisms that work with the grain of SIDS' capacity constraints and local practices (Wilkinson et al., 2025). Simultaneously, many of the demands made by SIDS stakeholders – especially around digitalisation, innovation, data systems, youth skills, culture and biodiversity – are diverging with donor priorities, therefore technical assistance should be realigned and greater investment should be made in institutional capacity.

7.3 Where do we go from here?

The SSR2026 Introduction opens with the anchoring claim that the special case is under threat, before discussing development options and demands made by SIDS. Island nations want action on six things: diversification, self-sufficiency, extractivism, technology, knowledge-sharing, and voice and representation. To be clear, these priorities are far from comprehensive – they are not all that SIDS stakeholders care about. Rather, they are the six broad themes that continually cropped up at the Future Forum in 2026.



Filming Climate Blueprint, Dominica, 2024.
Photo: RESI/Ben Merker, Merk Films.

The discussion of these priorities in the Introduction is explanatory – focusing on the ‘what’ and ‘why’ questions – but here in the Conclusions it is more provocative, focused on the ‘how’. This section sketches out, however imperfectly, the avenues that might be worth pursuing and perhaps the beginnings of an initial framework from which a blueprint might be developed.

Specifically, we offer brief suggestions for how the entire SIDS stakeholder community can collectively and collaboratively rethink the wider challenge of defending the special case by asserting SIDS' global value to humanity in a number of key areas. This chapter therefore consolidates the dialogue stimulated by both the SSR2026 and

the Future Forum 2026, and suggests a short- and medium-term roadmap for productive conversations that will shape the SSR2028 and the Future Forum 2028 as the ABAS reaches its mid-point.

7.3.1 The SIDS ‘special case’ must be defended through value not just vulnerability

For almost four decades, SIDS have been recognised by the international community as ‘a special case for sustainable development’ (Bishop et al., 2021). But that consensus is now fraying. The risk is not disappearance, but waning relevance, where the SIDS agenda still exists but struggles to progress in a post-hegemonic, resource-constrained multilateral order which is itself fraying too. This, in turn, means SIDS will struggle to have the same effect on international organisations and the processes and mechanisms servicing them as they have in the recent past (Corbett et al., 2021).

SIDS could more strongly articulate their global value – as custodians of biodiversity, providers of climate leadership, designers of transitional technologies, producers of unique cultural heritage or generators of institutional legitimacy.

RESI’s Directors – the authors of this Conclusion and the editors of this report – would be the very last people to ever question the reality of enduring vulnerability in SIDS. Indeed, our strong view is that the special circumstances of SIDS are undeniable, much

as some would seek to deny them (Bishop et al., 2025). As stated in the Introduction to the SSR2026 though, this is not the whole story. And, by implication, it is also not the only basis on which SIDS can or should defend their special case. Rather, a strategic shift could be envisaged encompassing a twin-track defence. This combines a staunch reassertion of vulnerability-based claims that centre on showing the sudden, disproportionate, excessive and unfair costs of exogenous shocks with an equally assertive argument about the unjustifiable losses when SIDS are not compensated. This is, of course, already happening to a degree in areas like the ‘loss and damage’ process (Marinescu and Bishop, 2026). But SIDS could more strongly articulate their global value – as custodians of biodiversity, providers of climate leadership, designers of transitional technologies, producers of unique cultural heritage or generators of institutional legitimacy – and the losses to humanity as a whole when their rights to development and sovereign statehood are undermined and revoked by devastating geopolitical, economic or environmental shocks.

The policy implication of this is stark: unless SIDS and their partners can demonstrate that the deterioration of their ecosystems, societies, cultures and governance contributions represents a net loss to humanity, the special treatment promised (but not always delivered) will keep eroding. Meanwhile, a focus on the value(s) of SIDS forces other nations to account for what will be lost if the needs of small countries are not met.

There are, for sure, many other stories and defences that may be mounted. By encouraging stakeholders to think more aggressively in these terms, we hope we

can collectively showcase the enormous leadership provided by SIDS globally in ways that benefit island nations themselves and international society more broadly.

7.3.2 Diversification should reduce reliance on extractive development models

Despite strong rhetoric around greater sustainability – and interesting practice across island regions, from geothermal power to floating solar farms – SIDS economies are often still structurally embedded in extractive dynamics. These can be explicit, for example overt forms of rent-seeking, resource extraction and industrial state capture by external actors. They can also be implicit, like in the informal care economy where much hidden labour is performed by women and left uncounted and unpaid. Continuing dependence on imported fuels, dominant enclave tourism models, pressure to exploit seabed resources, and the extraction of labour and care from overburdened populations all reflect different elements of the same dynamics.

Extraction is not only environmental, but social and economic too – value is appropriated from ecosystems, from communities and from informal systems. We do not pretend that this deep-seated structural challenge will be easy to solve. There are power asymmetries and distributional conflicts in even the best-functioning and best-governed capitalist economies. But recognising those inequalities and, more importantly, the market and policy failures that reproduce them, is a first step to improving things.

What this means for SIDS, practically, is that to achieve economic diversification and greater productivity, new growth pathways are needed that enhance self-sufficiency, resilience, equity and quality of life as opposed to pathways that deepen dependency or create new forms of rentierism.

Extraction is not only environmental, but social and economic too – value is appropriated from ecosystems, from communities and from informal systems.



Dhangethi, the Maldives. Photo: Konstantin Mishchenko/Pexels.

7.3.3 Implementation failure can be addressed by properly valuing SIDS

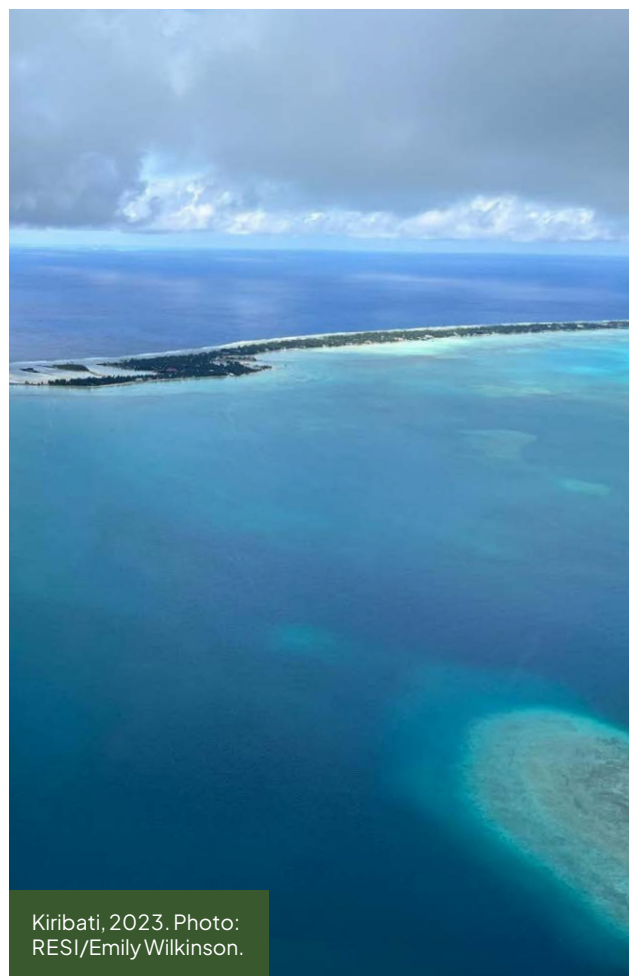
Across all domains, the binding constraint is not a lack of novel ideas and innovative solutions, but a failure of implementation. This is rooted in misaligned global systems of finance, data and governance.

Concessional finance is inaccessible, debt burdens are worsening and donor priorities are, in many cases, diverging from the needs identified by SIDS themselves. This is particularly true in digitalisation, innovation and capacity strengthening (Wilkinson et al., 2025; Panwar et al., 2026). Meanwhile, data systems fail to capture SIDS' realities, including loss and damage, informal economies and care work.

The implication is that the international system systematically underestimates both the needs and the contributions of SIDS, leading to chronic underinvestment. A troubling conclusion follows from this: without reform of global financing and data architectures – including vulnerability-based allocation and outcome-based metrics – the ABAS will not be implemented effectively.

SIDS are effectively subsidising global sustainability.

One way to transform this picture is to make stronger statements about the wider value of SIDS. Embedded in this simple idea is a powerful analytical insight: SIDS generate substantial global public value well beyond that which accrues to them. But this is neither meaningfully captured in existing data nor



Kiribati, 2023. Photo: RESI/Emily Wilkinson.

effectively compensated by financing mechanisms. So, rather than being net recipients from a generous multilateral system – as they are generally perceived – SIDS are actually net contributors to a miserly one.

Plenty of evidence in the SSR2026 supports this claim: from unpaid domestic care work that reproduces SIDS populations, communities and cultures, to international biodiversity protection and ocean stewardship that provides a core global public good. Indeed, SIDS hold a disproportionate share of global biodiversity and play a vital role in maintaining ocean and climate systems, yet the benefits are largely externalised and the costs are borne locally. SIDS are effectively subsidising global sustainability.

This potentially represents a massive systemic distortion with significant political implications: what is not measured is not financed, and what is not financed is not sustained. The policy implication, then, is that we need a radical expansion and rethinking of what actually counts as ‘value’, placing natural-, social- and care-based contributions ‘on the balance sheet’ and linking them to financing mechanisms. At the same time, environmental and cultural stewardship must be linked to predictable, scaled and equitable financing mechanisms, including those that recognise ecosystem services and nature-based solutions. Without this, SIDS will be treated as low-productivity economies still, rather than high-value systems operating under structural constraints.

7.3.4 Systemic challenges require capacity as well as finance

Energy, water, infrastructure, transport, social systems and environmental management are deeply interconnected in SIDS contexts, yet policy and financing responses remain siloed and project-based. We know this, of course, and almost all SIDS stakeholders lament the lack of systemic support to holistically connect disparate issues and advance long-term programmatic agendas.

Given the spatial concentration and limited redundancy of SIDS systems, failures cascade rapidly across entire economies and societies. This means piecemeal interventions are insufficient and counterproductive. The global community needs to shift towards integrated, system-level investment packages, supported by coordinated governance and long-term planning. And donors must change their behaviour: stop funding projects, start funding systems, and

support the establishment – and, crucially, the maintenance – of concrete structures for lesson-sharing across regions, issues and levels of governance.

The global community needs to shift towards integrated, system-level investment packages, supported by coordinated governance and long-term planning.

For this kind of agenda to work, SIDS need adequate financing plus capacity-building support. This is well-known too: it has featured in the academic literature on small state politics dating back to the immediate post-war period (Corbett, 2023). Almost every speaker, at almost every SIDS meeting, acknowledges limited capacity as a key feature of whatever challenge is under discussion.

It is particularly surprising, therefore, that so little of the debate about what needs to be done takes seriously the question of buttressing state capacity. Small administrations manage multiple, overlapping crises and international obligations. The same limited pool of officials is expected to negotiate global agreements, design national policies and oversee implementation across sectors. This creates a structural bottleneck that cannot be solved by finance alone. Capacity strengthening must be treated as core infrastructure – covering investment in institutions, regulatory systems and technical expertise – if long-term interventions are to have a chance of working (Wilkinson et al., 2025).



Man harvesting sugar cane, Trinidad, Cuba.
Photo: Nesrin Ozdemir/Shutterstock.com.

7.3.5 Technological opportunities can offset size-related constraints

The final point in this concluding chapter considers the rapid shifts occurring in digital and other forms of technology.

A key constraint across SIDS is the prevalence of deep-seated inequalities, whether between generations, sexes, classes, ethnic groups or communities. These can be especially pronounced in remote and archipelagic states. Many SIDS are characterised by high levels of informal labour, weak social protection and other forms of exclusion that render them less able than other countries to absorb shocks and sustain development gains. But these micro-dynamics are underprioritised in macro policy.

Social systems are not peripheral but rather central to other forms of economic, governing and environmental resilience, and therefore addressing inequality – by investing in education, care, health, social protection and territorial contiguity – is a prerequisite

for achieving the broader objectives of the ABAS. Digital technologies and artificial intelligence (AI) potentially complicate this picture though. On the one hand, these technologies may foster greater inclusion by helping SIDS overcome their remoteness and by automating administrative functions that currently require large amounts of scarce labour. But they could also reinforce dependency if SIDS are slow or passive adopters of externally driven systems (Lindsay et al., 2025).

The deeper issue, then, is not access to technology per se, but control over its development and governance. This points to a need for investment in digital infrastructure, skills and innovation ecosystems, alongside stronger collaboration and lesson-sharing across SIDS. The policy implication is that technological ‘leapfrogging’, about which many observers are excited when it comes to AI, will only occur if SIDS are positioned as builders of systems not end-users of external solutions.

7.4 Towards the SSR2028

At best we are living in a highly destabilising global context, and at worst an exceptionally bleak and forbidding one. But there is much that can be done if we collectively seize the opportunities in front of us.

SIDS have historically shown considerable success in shaping global norms and processes. The task going forwards is to rethink and reconceive the stories we tell, the arguments we make and the changes we advocate for in this new and uncertain era. We know that the collective voice of SIDS is far louder than the sum of its parts, but it is being heard unevenly across issue areas and it is being institutionalised insufficiently beyond negotiation spaces.

The fragmentation discussed throughout the SSR2026 limits the ability to coordinate action, share best practice and influence broader global agendas. Stronger institutional architectures for SIDS–SIDS cooperation are needed to support continuous engagement, knowledge-sharing and strategic coordination otherwise countries risk being outmanoeuvred in the competitive global system.

For too long, the world has benefited from what SIDS offer without compensating them commensurately.

One answer to this problem is to balance asserting vulnerability with articulating value. This spans designing projects to building systems, and from revealing extraction to facilitating transformation. Taken together, the insights in this SSR2026

make a small but significant start in envisaging a fundamental shift in how the SIDS agenda is framed and pursued.

The central task is not simply to manage vulnerability, but to reposition SIDS as high-value contributors within a rapidly changing global order, while simultaneously transforming domestic development pathways away from extractive, fragmented and under-resourced models. In the words of the authors of Chapter 4 of the SSR2026, SIDS are ‘the frontline laboratory for global resilience’. This, in turn, demands an assertive, evidence-based and strategically coordinated approach: one that recognises the urgency of the current moment and the opportunity to reshape the terms through which SIDS engage. For too long, the world has benefited from what SIDS offer without compensating them commensurately.



Filming Climate Blueprint, Dominica, 2024.
Photo: RESI/Ben Merker, Merk Films.

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Chapter 3

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Appendix 1. Key data sources and indices measuring productive capacities in SIDS

Data source/index	Scope/focus	Description/coverage	Reference
UNCTAD Productive Capacities Index (PCI)	Comprehensive multidimensional index.	Assesses 43 indicators across 8 dimensions including human capital, infrastructure, innovation, institutions. Global coverage of all SIDS.	UNCTAD (2025a)
UNDP SIDS Data Platform	Economic, social, infrastructure, innovation and climate-resilience data.	Global coverage of SIDS, providing comprehensive and updated statistics for policy and analysis.	UNDP (n.d.)
Caribbean Digital Transformation Index	ICT adoption and digital economy metrics.	Regional focus on Caribbean SIDS, tracking progress in digital infrastructure and digital economic activity.	CDB (2023)
Pacific Economic Monitor (Asian Development Bank)	Economic trends and infrastructure.	Biannual updates focused on Pacific SIDS' economic performance and infrastructure developments.	ADB (2024)
Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) blue transformation and fisheries statistics	Sector-specific focus on blue economy and fisheries.	Data covering marine resources, fisheries sustainability and economic contributions of blue economy sectors.	FAO (2024)
OECD reports on infrastructure finance	Infrastructure finance, green bonds, innovative financing mechanisms.	Analyses and recommendations on infrastructure investment and financing challenges in SIDS.	OECD (2023)
International Telecommunication Union (ITU) reports on digital development	Development of digital infrastructure and e-governance.	Detailed analysis of ICT development and connectivity in SIDS.	ITU (2024)
Academic and think tank research	Context-specific analyses covering economic diversification, productivity, resilience and policy implications.	In-depth studies providing qualitative and quantitative insights tailored to SIDS contexts.	Hambleton and Jeyaseelan (2024); Briguglio and Moncada (2022); Pomeroy (2021)

Source: Authors' compilation.

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