THE STATE OF SIDS REPORT 2026

Defending the special case

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Chapter 5

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AND PLANETARY SUSTAINABILITY: REBALANCING NATURE-HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS

The Resilient and Sustainable Islands Initiative
by ODI Global

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Abbreviations and acronyms

ABAS	Antigua and Barbuda Agenda for SIDS
BBNJ	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction
COP	Conference of the Parties
DRR	disaster risk reduction
DSM	deep-sea mining
EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zone
GBF	Global Biodiversity Framework
GDP	gross domestic product
ICJ	International Court of Justice
IPLC	Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities
IUU	illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing
LMMA	Locally Managed Marine Area
MPA	Marine Protected Area
MSP	marine spatial planning
NbS	nature-based solution
SIDS	Small Island Developing States
SPAW	Specially Protected Areas and Wildlife
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
WTO	World Trade Organization

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

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Sea turtle, Turks and Caicos Islands. Photo: OldBearPhoto/Shutterstock.com.

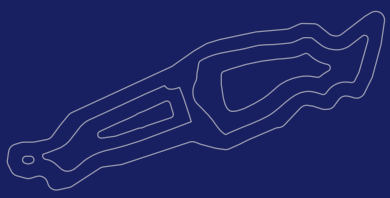
Summary

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

The Maldives. Photo: Ishan @seefromthesky/Unsplash.

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 CO_2 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 (Galaitsi 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

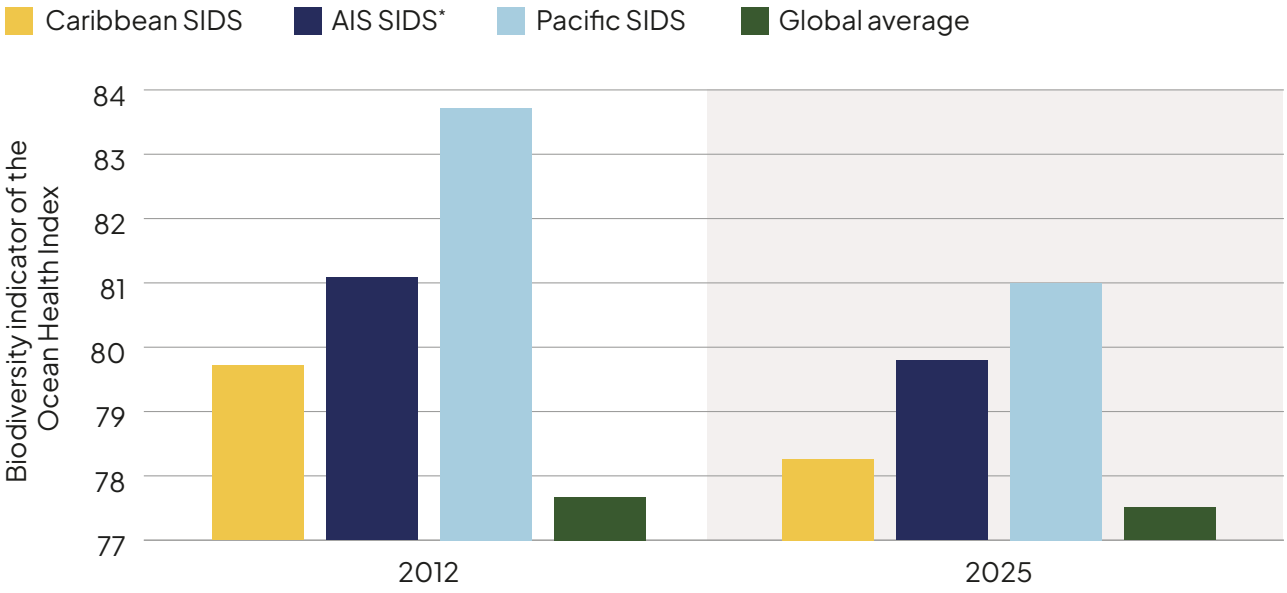
agriculture and settlements. Pollution from land-based sources, including agrochemicals and inadequately treated sewage, also degrades water quality and coastal ecosystems. Meanwhile, recycling is often unfeasible in SIDS due to low waste volumes, high transport costs and geographic isolation – constraints 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,

RESI Side Event, United Nations Ocean Conference (UNOC3) 2025. Photo: Sylvie Pope Photography.

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

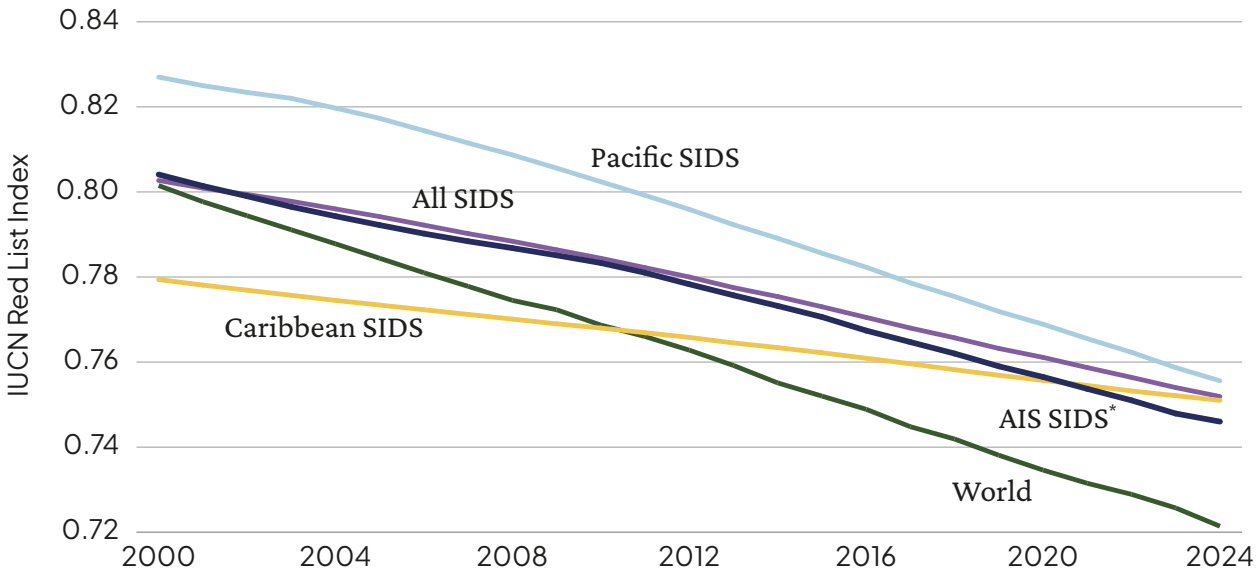
The Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF), adopted at COP15 to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity in 2022, commits to halting biodiversity loss and restoring ecosystems globally by 2030. Key objectives are to conserve 30% of terrestrial, inland water and

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

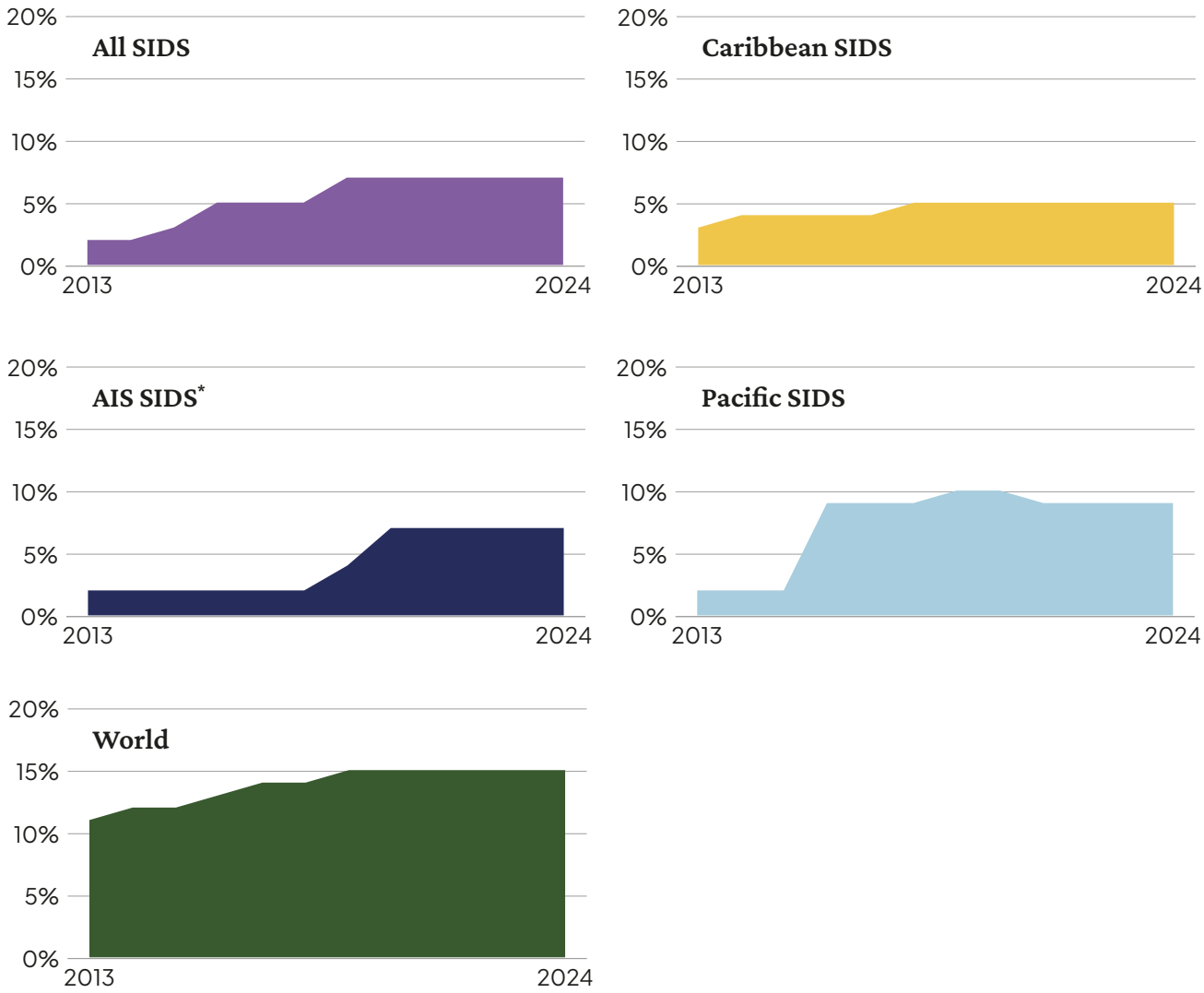


Note: *Excluding Singapore. The Red List Index measures overall extinction risk across groups of species with lower values indicating higher risk.

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).

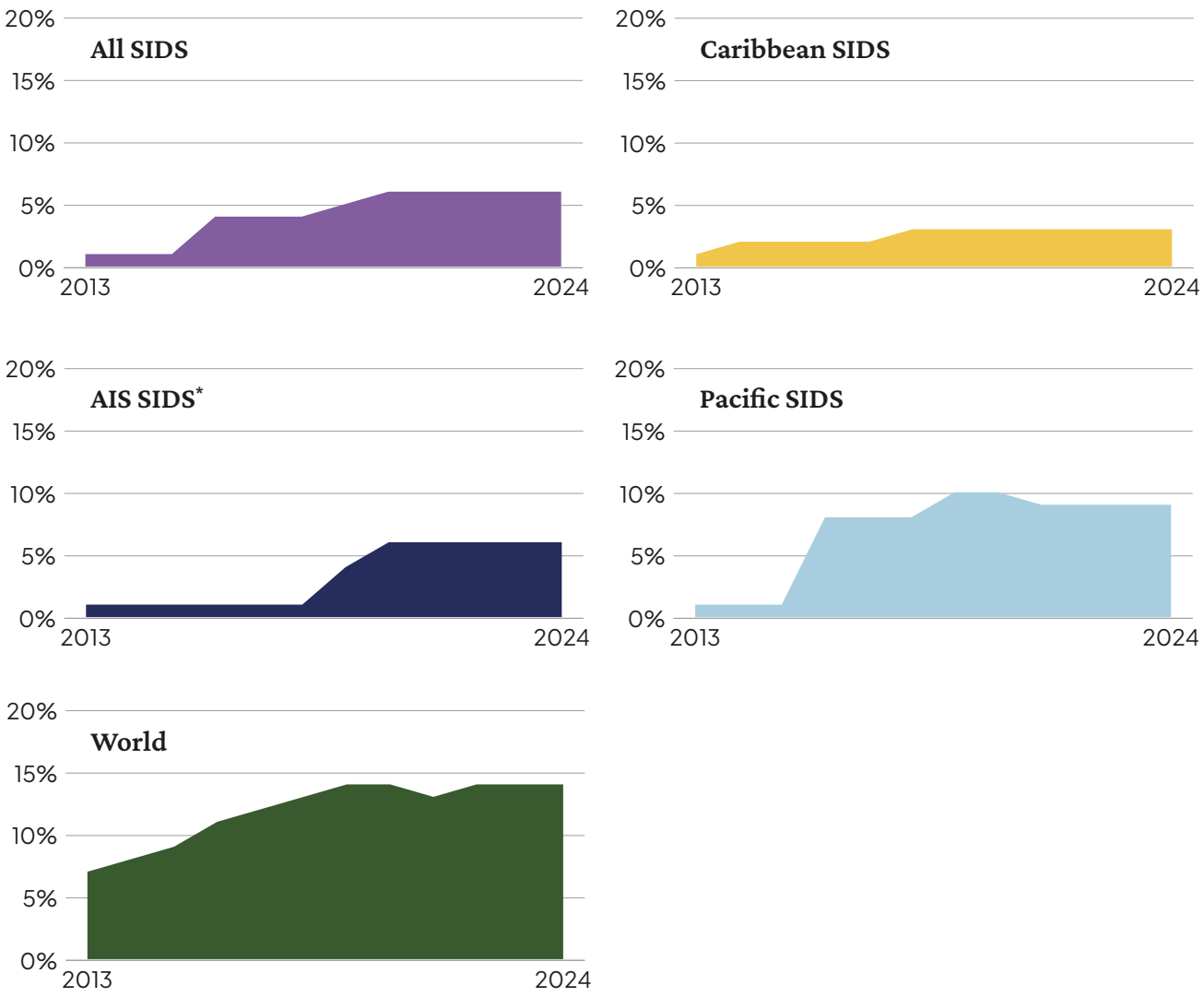
Figure 5.3 Total territorial protected area, 2013–2024



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).

Mangrove, Kiribati, 2023. Photo: RESI/Emily Wilkinson.

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 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.

Filming Climate Blueprint, Vetiver slope stabilisation in Dominica, 2024. Photo: RESI/Ben Merker, Merk Films.

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.

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.

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Eydhafushi, the Maldives. Photo: Asad Photo Maldives/pexels.