

Commonwealth Case Studies on Sea Level Rise

Common Themes Report



The Commonwealth



COP29
Baku
Azerbaijan

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About the Commonwealth

The Commonwealth is a voluntary association of 56 independent and equal sovereign countries and home to 2.7 billion people. The Commonwealth Secretariat is an independent organisation working with the 56 member countries and assists them together to promote prosperity, democracy and peace, amplify the voice of small states, and protect the environment.

The Commonwealth Secretariat's Climate Change and Oceans Directorate assists its member countries to sustainably manage their natural resources, in the ocean and on land, for the benefit of present and future generations. The Secretariat provides technical assistance and supports member countries in the development of policies, laws, and the strengthening of national institutions.

Executive Summary

This report draws together the findings of five country case studies on sea level rise (SLR) commissioned by the Commonwealth Secretariat's Climate Change and Oceans Directorate and updated in 2026: Guyana, Kiribati, Papua New Guinea (PNG), Tonga and Tuvalu. Spanning a low-lying mainland coastal plain in South America and four Pacific small island developing states (SIDS), the five studies together offer a comparative view of how Commonwealth coastal nations are experiencing, and responding to, rising seas.

Three findings cut across every country. First, SLR is being felt now, and faster than the global mean: observed local rates range from roughly 5 millimetres (mm) per year in Tuvalu and Kiribati to 7.3mm per year in Tonga and 4.7–10.2mm per year in Guyana. In each case, this is well above the global average of approximately 3.2–3.5mm per year, and is amplified locally by land subsidence, tectonics and coastal erosion. Second, exposure is extreme and concentrated: between 59 per cent of people (PNG) and the entire population (Tuvalu) live in the coastal zone, alongside the bulk of national assets, infrastructure and economic activity. Third, none of the five countries yet has adaptation governance and finance arrangements adequate enough to deal with the scale of the threat.

The studies also reveal a consistent set of constraints – fragmented legal and institutional frameworks, weak vertical and horizontal co-ordination, heavy dependence on donor finance, persistent gaps between planning and implementation, logistical barriers to reaching remote communities, and thin monitoring and evaluation. Equally, they surface transferable good practice: ecosystem-based adaptation (notably mangroves) integrated with hard infrastructure, the mainstreaming of adaptation into national development planning, dedicated climate finance vehicles such as Tonga's Climate Change Trust Fund, and the institutionalisation of adaptation capacity, as in Tuvalu's move to establish a Coastal Management Authority.

The present report closes with cross-cutting recommendations for member countries and for the Secretariat's continued technical assistance under the Commonwealth Blue Charter.

Context: Sea Level Rise and the Commonwealth

The Commonwealth's engagement with SLR dates from the 1989 *Holdgate Report, Climate Change: Meeting the Challenge*, prepared by a Commonwealth Group of Experts (Commonwealth Secretariat, 1989). That report was among the early international assessments to set out, in clear terms, the consequences of a warming climate for low-lying and island states, including the loss of land through flooding, saltwater intrusion into freshwater resources, threats to food security, displacement of coastal populations and increased risks to health. More than three decades later, these impacts remain central to the five countries considered in this case study series, demonstrating the enduring relevance of the concerns identified in the Holdgate analysis.

SLR sits at the centre of the global climate agenda. Under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the 2015 Paris Agreement, member countries have committed to limiting warming and to strengthening adaptation, with each country setting out its priorities through Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and, increasingly, National Adaptation Plans (NAPs). NDCs encompass both mitigation and adaptation efforts under the Paris Agreement, while NAPs provide a framework for identifying medium- and long-term adaptation needs and integrating adaptation into development planning. Sustainable Development Goal 14 (Life Below Water) and the wider 2030 Agenda similarly frame ocean health and coastal resilience as developmental, economic and environmental imperatives. For SIDS and low-lying coastal states, the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) has long advocated for greater international action on climate change and its impacts. The growing focus on loss and damage also recognises that, even with effective mitigation and adaptation, some climate-related impacts and losses cannot be fully addressed through adaptation alone.

In 2024, all 56 Commonwealth countries adopted the Apia Commonwealth Ocean Declaration for One Resilient Common Future (ACOD). The Declaration sets out an ambitious framework for

collective ocean action, including commitments to protect at least 30 per cent of the ocean and restore at least 30 per cent of degraded marine ecosystems by 2030; advance sustainable management of national waters; support marine renewable energy in line with the global climate agenda; address marine pollution, including plastic pollution; and strengthen action on climate adaptation, sustainable fisheries and the blue economy. It also recognises the implications of SLR for national maritime boundaries and calls for the development and implementation of coastal climate adaptation plans and strategies, including vulnerability assessments and nature-based solutions. The ACOD organises these ambitions around five broad areas: the ocean–climate nexus; marine pollution; sustainable fisheries; marine protection and restoration; and the sustainable blue economy (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2024).

The Commonwealth Secretariat Oceans team supports implementation of the ACOD through four main channels. First, the Commonwealth Blue Charter Action Groups, led by member-country champions, provide a platform for countries to share experience, develop knowledge and support practical action across ocean-related themes. Second, the Blue Finance Working Group brings together governments and partners to develop financing pathways and opportunities for ocean action, including work on the Commonwealth Guide to Blue Bond Issuance and the Blue Bond Readiness Programme. Third, technical assistance supports member countries on priority ocean governance issues, including implementation of the UN Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) Agreement through capacity building, legislative review, legal drafting and support for participation in international processes, as well as maritime boundary delimitation and responses to SLR. Fourth, the Commonwealth Blue Charter Project Incubator provides grants of up to £50,000 to governments and their partners to develop early-stage solutions across marine pollution, ecosystem restoration, sustainable fisheries, the sustainable blue economy and the ocean–climate nexus.

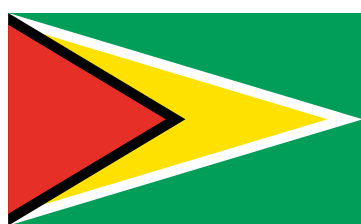
It is against this backdrop that the Secretariat prepared five country case studies on SLR. The purpose of the series is threefold: to refresh the evidence base with current data and references; to present each country's vulnerability, policy response and adaptation effectiveness in a consistent, comparable format; and – through this synthesis – to draw cross-cutting lessons that can inform the Secretariat's technical assistance and the adaptation efforts of Commonwealth members more broadly. Each case study applies a common analytical structure and assesses adaptation effectiveness against five criteria of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) to assess the adequacy and effectiveness of adaptation planning: comprehensiveness, inclusiveness, implementability, integration, and monitoring and evaluation (UNEP, 2021).

The Secretariat has completed detailed case studies on five member countries: Guyana, Kiribati, Papua New Guinea, Tonga and Tuvalu. These case studies provide a practical evidence base for translating the commitments of the ACOD into country-level action. By examining how different Commonwealth members are assessing SLR risks, developing adaptation policies, mobilising finance, strengthening institutions and addressing implementation challenges, the series can help identify common capacity needs, transferable approaches and areas where targeted technical

assistance could support delivery of the ACOD. The findings can also inform wider Commonwealth efforts on coastal climate adaptation, nature-based solutions, maritime boundaries, sustainable blue economies and access to ocean finance.

On 24 September 2026, the UN General Assembly adopted the UN Declaration on Sea Level Rise. This declaration addresses the existential threats posed by SLR, reinforcing the need for strengthened international cooperation and coordinated, adequately financed action. It also underscored the importance of translating global commitments into practical measures to support vulnerable countries and communities (United Nations General Assembly, 2026).

Figure 1. Flags of Guyana, Kiribati, Papua New Guinea, Tonga and Tuvalu



Guyana



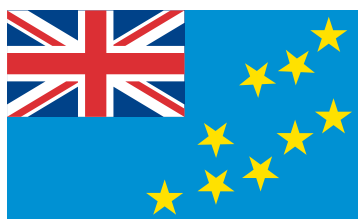
Kiribati



Papua New Guinea



Tonga



Tuvalu

The Five Countries at a Glance

The five countries differ markedly in geography, scale and economic circumstance, yet share a common exposure to rising seas. Table 1 summarises their defining characteristics; the sections that follow draw out the themes they hold in common.

Table 1. Defining characteristics of the five case study countries

Country	Coastal exposure	Observed local SLR	Defining adaptation challenge
Guyana	Coastal plain 0.5–1m below sea level at high tide; ~90% of population and >50% of GDP on the coast; 425km coastline (Hickey and Weis, 2012; World Bank, 2001)	4.7–10.2 mm/y (historical Georgetown tide-gauge estimates); projected to increase substantially by 2100 (Government of Guyana, 2002; Ruh Ali, 2016)	Managing surging asset exposure during an oil-driven economic transition; fragmented coastal-zone governance
Kiribati	32 atolls and one raised coral island spread over 3.5 million km ² of ocean; land area 811 km ² ; approximately half of the population lives on South Tarawa (Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, n.d.)	~5 mm/y at Betio, Tarawa (Pacific Climate Change Portal, n.d.).	Aid-funded adaptation (the KAP) under a MIRAB economy; donor co-ordination and local capacity (Government of Kiribati, 2015; World Bank, 2015)
Papua New Guinea	~17,110 km coastline across 15 maritime provinces; ~59% of the population depends on water transport; ~4,500 km of shoreline at risk of moderate to severe inundation (JICA, n.d.; Government of Papua New Guinea, 2000)	Regionally elevated; low-lying islands already experiencing submergence (Government of Papua New Guinea, 2000)	Governance effectiveness across national, provincial and local levels; legal and institutional gaps; remote-terrain logistics (Government of Papua New Guinea, 2023; IMF, 2025)
Tonga	84% of the population lives within 1 km of the coast; second most at-risk country in the 2017 World Risk Report (Andrew et al., 2019; Bündnis Entwicklung Hilft, 2017).	7.3mm/y (since 1993)	Mainstreaming adaptation and sustaining climate finance; private sector and community engagement
Tuvalu	26 km ² total land; maximum elevation 4.6 m, average <3 m; entire population within 1 km of the ocean (Government of Tuvalu, 2024; Andrew et al., 2019)	~5 mm/y (Australian Bureau of Meteorology and CSIRO, 2011; Pacific Climate Change Portal, n.d.)	Existential exposure; outer-island logistics; donor dependency; adaptation–loss and damage continuum (Government of Tuvalu, 2012; IMF, 2023)

Note: GDP = gross domestic product; KAP = Kiribati Adaptation Programme; km = kilometres; km² = square kilometres; m = metres; MIRAB = 'migration, remittances, aid and bureaucracy'.

Common Themes

Local sea level rise is outpacing the global average

In every country, locally observed rates of SLR exceed the global mean of roughly 3.2–3.5mm per year. Tonga has recorded 7.3mm per year since 1993; Tuvalu and Kiribati around 5mm per year; and Guyana between 4.7 and 10.2mm per year along the Georgetown coast. Local rise is consistently amplified by factors beyond thermal expansion and ice melt – for example, land subsidence from groundwater extraction (estimated at up to 10mm per year in parts of Guyana), tectonic movement, sediment dynamics and coastal erosion. The practical implication is shared: the design assumptions and return periods on which existing defences and settlements were built are already obsolete, and adaptation must be sized to local, not global, projections.

Extreme concentration of people and assets on the coast

The defining vulnerability across all five countries is the concentration of population, infrastructure and economic activity in a narrow, low-lying coastal strip. In Tuvalu, the entire population lives within a kilometre of the ocean; in Tonga, 80 per cent of people and critical infrastructure sit within the same band; in Guyana, some 90 per cent of the population and over half of gross domestic product (GDP) are concentrated on a coastal plain that lies below sea level at high tide; and in PNG, 59 per cent of the population lives in maritime provinces. Because exposure rises with development, several studies warn that economic success can deepen risk: Guyana's oil-driven boom is concentrating still more assets on the coast, lifting estimated asset exposure to episodic flooding to around US\$43.5 billion. Adaptation that merely maintains today's risk level becomes more costly each year as the value of what lies behind the defences grows.

Adaptation is a developmental challenge, not only an environmental one

A recurring lesson – articulated most explicitly in the Kiribati study – is that effective adaptation depends on treating SLR as a development concern to be mainstreamed across economic planning, rather than as a standalone environmental problem. Vulnerability is shaped as much by urban overcrowding, housing deficits, weak service delivery and poverty as by physical exposure. South Tarawa's congestion in Kiribati, Guyana's 20,000-home low-income housing deficit, and PNG's thin rural infrastructure all amplify climate risk independently of the sea itself. It follows that adaptation cannot be separated from broader development objectives, and that the most durable gains come where climate resilience is embedded in national development strategies, sector plans and budgets.

A shared four-part adaptation repertoire

Despite very different contexts, all five countries draw on the same family of responses: protection through hard infrastructure (seawalls, groynes, revetments, embankments, drainage); accommodation (raised housing, climate-resilient crops, disaster preparedness, early warning); ecosystem-based adaptation (especially mangroves, with coral reefs and seagrass); and advance or retreat (land reclamation, planned inland relocation, managed migration). The balance differs by geography – Guyana and Tuvalu lean heavily on engineered protection and reclamation, Kiribati and PNG on community-based and ecosystem measures – but the studies converge on the same conclusion: no single approach suffices, and integrated combinations tailored to local coastal dynamics consistently outperform reliance on hard defences alone.

Ecosystem-based adaptation and the central role of mangroves

Mangroves emerge as the most widely shared nature-based solution. They provide coastal protection by dampening wave energy and stabilising sediments, alongside fisheries habitat, biodiversity and carbon co-benefits, and they are markedly cheaper to maintain than concrete defences. Guyana's mangrove monitoring system (integrating GIS (Geographic Information System), remote sensing and community Village Mangrove Action Committees), Kiribati's community mangrove planting under the Kiribati Adaptation Programme (KAP), and Tonga's mangrove nurseries all feature as exemplars. Two cautions recur: mangroves suffer 'coastal squeeze' where hard structures or development block their landward migration, and they perform best when integrated within a coastal-zone management framework and are co-located with engineering where wave energy is high. Guyana's roughly 70 per cent loss of mangrove cover between 1992 and 2015 illustrates how quickly this natural asset can be eroded by development pressure.

Fragmented governance and weak integration

Governance weakness is the most consistent constraint on effectiveness. Legal frameworks are fragmented and resource specific rather than integrated: Guyana still lacks comprehensive coastal-zone management legislation and enforceable building codes, while PNG's Organic Law on Provincial and Local Level Governments contains gaps and inconsistencies that leave the responsibilities of the three tiers of government unclear. Both vertical integration (national to provincial to local) and horizontal integration (across sectors) are repeatedly identified as deficient. Provincial governments in PNG lack climate offices and trained personnel; in Guyana, sea-defence responsibilities have never been fully devolved from national to sector level. Where governance has worked better – for example, Tonga's and Tuvalu's mainstreaming of adaptation into successive national strategies – sustained political commitment across electoral cycles has been the decisive ingredient.

Finance: donor dependency, aid effectiveness and a Guyanese exception

Four of the five countries depend heavily on external climate finance, and the studies document the costs of that dependency: donor fragmentation imposes a heavy administrative burden on small governments (Kiribati), progress is left hostage to shifting donor priorities (Tuvalu), and a persistent gap separates approved from disbursed funds across the Pacific. The shared lessons are to consolidate funding under co-ordinated frameworks (Kiribati's Joint Implementation Plan; Tuvalu's move to a Coastal Management Authority), to build fiduciary capacity to access global funds, and to develop dedicated domestic vehicles – Tonga's Climate Change Trust Fund, the first in the Pacific, being the standout example. Guyana is the exception: offshore oil revenues channelled through its Natural Resource Fund (around US\$3.6 billion by September 2025) offer fiscal space the Pacific SIDS lack – though whether those resources are directed to adaptation will depend on national budget priorities, and the same oil economy is what is driving up coastal exposure.

The gap between planning and implementation

Across the studies, ambition in design repeatedly outruns delivery on the ground. A UN Development Programme (UNDP) flood-adaptation project across five PNG provinces was rated overall unsatisfactory, hampered by complex design, weak co-ordination, inaccessibility and the absence of trained local personnel; while Tuvalu's National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA) 1 was assessed as largely unsuccessful before NAPA 2 improved by tackling the practical logistics of reaching outer islands (including, simply, acquiring a boat). Implementation is impeded by limited institutional and technical capacity, staff turnover that erodes hard-won knowledge, and the formidable logistics of serving remote and dispersed communities. Monitoring and evaluation is the weakest link of all: data gaps are frequent, vulnerability mapping is often absent and few countries have context-specific indicators to judge whether adaptation is actually working.

Migration, relocation, and the limits of adaptation

For the most exposed nations, the studies confront the question of how far in-place adaptation can go. PNG is already managing displacement, with communities from the Carteret atolls and other low islands relocating – and its experience shows that customary land tenure and the absence of any policy for climate-displaced people make resettlement deeply difficult. Kiribati and Tuvalu maintain managed-migration pathways (such as New Zealand's Pacific Access Category) as a complementary safety valve, while emphasising that for most citizens, in-situ adaptation is strongly preferred in order to preserve cultural identity, dignity and sovereignty. Tuvalu's framing is the most pointed: adaptation, disaster risk reduction, and loss and damage must be addressed together, because climate shocks can compound and previously successful strategies may fail.

Compounding shocks and the disaster-risk frame

SLR rarely arrives alone. The case studies sit within a wider disaster-risk context: Guyana's 2005 flood caused losses exceeding 50 per cent of GDP, with further major floods in 2021, 2022 and 2024; Tonga absorbed the Hunga Tonga–Hunga Ha'apai eruption and tsunamis of January 2022 (with damages amounting to over 36 per cent of GDP) on top of COVID-19; and PNG suffered the catastrophic Enga landslide of May 2024. These compounding shocks divert scarce resources from long-term adaptation to emergency recovery and underline why early warning, disaster preparedness and response capacity feature as adaptation priorities in every study.

Recommendations

The following cross-cutting recommendations distil the priorities common to the five case studies.

Plan for local realities. Size adaptation to locally observed and projected rise – including subsidence – rather than the global average, and lead with integrated, hybrid solutions that combine hard infrastructure with ecosystem-based adaptation tailored to local wave energy and sediment dynamics.

Strengthen and integrate governance. Close the legislative and institutional gaps that fragment coastal governance: enact integrated coastal-zone management legislation, clarify the climate-adaptation mandates of national, provincial and local government (notably through reform of PNG's Organic Law), and establish single co-ordinating mechanisms that connect coastal management, land-use planning, sea defence and disaster risk management.

Mainstream adaptation into development planning. Embed climate adaptation in national development strategies, sector plans and budgets so that resilience is built in rather than bolted on and sustained across electoral cycles. Tonga's and Tuvalu's alignment of adaptation with successive national strategies offers a replicable model.

Co-ordinate and diversify climate finance. Consolidate donor finance under co-ordinated national frameworks to reduce administrative burden, build fiduciary capacity to access global funds and develop dedicated domestic vehicles such as climate change trust funds. Resource-rich members such as Guyana should explicitly earmark a share of national revenues for long-term coastal resilience.

Invest in local capacity and delivery. Prioritise locally led, long-term capacity development over short-term reliance on international technical assistance, embedding skills at the national and local levels and designing programmes to retain knowledge despite staff turnover. Budget fully for the logistics of reaching remote and outer-island communities.

Scale up ecosystem-based adaptation. Protect and restore mangroves and other coastal ecosystems as cost-effective natural defences, avoiding coastal squeeze and managing them within integrated coastal-zone frameworks, with community stewardship and livelihood co-benefits (nurseries, apiculture, eco-tourism).

Strengthen data, monitoring and evaluation. Invest in sustained tide-gauge and shoreline monitoring, vulnerability mapping, and context-specific effectiveness indicators that capture social as well as physical outcomes, so that adaptation can be evaluated, learned from and improved.

Plan for displacement and loss and damage. Treat climate change adaptation, disaster risk reduction, and loss and damage as an integrated continuum; maintain managed-migration pathways as a complementary safety valve, while keeping in-situ adaptation – and the protection of cultural identity and sovereignty – at the centre.

Harness Commonwealth co-operation. Use the Blue Charter Action Groups as a platform for member-to-member exchange of the transferable practices identified here, and continue to support members in developing the policies, laws and institutions needed for coastal resilience.

Conclusion

Read together, the five case studies tell a coherent story. From the mainland coastal plain of Guyana to the atolls of Kiribati and Tuvalu, the high islands of Tonga, and the vast maritime provinces of Papua New Guinea, Commonwealth coastal nations face a threat that is already measurable, accelerating faster than the global average, and concentrated precisely where their people and economies are most exposed. The physical realities differ but the adaptation challenge is notably common.

That challenge is, at root, less about engineering than about governance, finance, capacity and the integration of adaptation into the everyday business of development. Where countries have mainstreamed adaptation into national planning, sustained political commitment across cycles, co-ordinated their finance, and combined engineered defences with healthy ecosystems and engaged communities, they have made real progress.

The value of viewing these five countries side by side lies in the transferability of their lessons. The good practices documented here – Tonga's trust fund, Guyana's mangrove monitoring, Kiribati's phased and mainstreamed programme, Tuvalu's move to institutionalise adaptation, and PNG's hard-won lessons on community ownership and land tenure – are precisely the kind of knowledge the Commonwealth Blue Charter exists to share. The Secretariat is well placed to broker that exchange, to continue providing technical assistance on policy, law and institutions, and to amplify the voice of its most vulnerable members in the global arenas where the future of adaptation and loss-and-damage finance will be decided. For the coastal and island nations of the Commonwealth, the sea will keep rising; the task now is to ensure that the pace and quality of adaptation keep ahead of it.

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