# Learning from the pandemic recovery for a more green and resilient future for all

## Cities and human settlements of Small Island Developing States

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GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

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Cities and human settlements of small island developing states: Learning from the pandemic recovery for a more green, resilient, and socially inclusive future



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# Abbreviations and acronyms

| | |
|---|---|
| **AOSIS** | Alliance of Small Island States |
| **CAF** | Development Bank of Latin America and the Caribbean |
| **CARICOM** | Caribbean Community |
| **CityRAP (tool)** | City Resilience Action Planning tool |
| **COVID-19** | Coronavirus disease |
| **DESA** | United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs |
| **EbA** | Ecosystem-based adaptation |
| **ECA** | Economic Commission for Africa |
| **ECLAC** | Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean |
| **ESCAP** | United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific |
| **FAO** | Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations |
| **FRLD** | Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage |
| **GDP** | Gross domestic product |
| **IMF** | International Monetary Fund |
| **IOC** | Indian Ocean Commission |
| **IPCC** | Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change |
| **LDCs** | Least Developed Countries |
| **MPI** | Multidimensional poverty index |
| **MSMEs** | Micro, small and medium-sized enterprises |
| **MVA** | Multi-layered vulnerability assessment |
| **NbS** | Nature-based solutions |
| **NUA** | New Urban Agenda |
| **ODA** | Official development assistance |
| **ODI** | Overseas Development Institute |
| **OECD** | Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development |
| **PNG** | Papua New Guinea |
| **PSUP** | Participatory Slum-Upgrading Programme |
| **SDG** | Sustainable Development Goal |
| **SIDS** | Small Island Developing States |
| **UN** | United Nations |
| **UNCTAD** | United Nations Conference on Trade and Development |
| **UNDP** | United Nations Development Programme |
| **UNESCO** | United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization |
| **UNFPA** | United Nations Population Fund |
| **UN GA** | United Nations General Assembly |
| **UN-Habitat** | United Nations Human Settlements Programme |
| **UNISDR (now UNDRR)** | United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction |
| **UN OHRLLS** | United Nations Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States |
| **USD** | United States dollar |
| **WHO** | World Health Organization |
| **WRI** | World Risk Index |

# Executive Summary

Small Island Developing States (SIDS) boast of rich biodiversity and vast ocean resources, ingenuity in traditional approaches to human-nature relationships, and strong regional platforms for global advocacy. At the same time, SIDS are also highly vulnerable to a multitude of shocks and stresses. Being small and remote, they rely to a significant extent on imports and remittances and their economies tend to be undiversified, making them sensitive to international trade, supply chain and travel disruptions. Economic downturns are often particularly painful for SIDS given already fragile socioeconomic conditions: over a third of these countries' combined population lives in multidimensional poverty, with women and youth experiencing particular disadvantage. As islands in the tropics, SIDS are acutely exposed to the slow- and rapid-onset impacts of accelerating climate change. SIDS' cities and human settlements are often concentrated on low-lying coastal land and unassisted in withstanding climate hazards by a combination of factors: rapid urbanization, lacking planning, complex land management systems, and inadequate housing, basic urban services and infrastructure, especially in growing informal settlements.

Against this backdrop, the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic hit SIDS hard. If the virus' health impacts remained limited in these remote islands compared to their continental peers, its economic and social shockwaves were all the more devastating, mirroring in some ways the well-known impacts of climate change-related hazards. The response and recovery process tested SIDS and their international partners to act swiftly, innovatively and strategically to minimize impacts and, ideally, to build back better systems and environments, leaving no one and no place behind. In this way, the pandemic experience offers immense learning opportunities for a SIDS future likely to remain afflicted by climate shocks and global economic disruptions. This report seeks to distil just such lessons learned in order to provide policy, practice and project recommendations to guide SIDS and friends of SIDS in promoting a greener, more resilient and inclusive future in island settlements. After sketching a picture of contemporary SIDS vulnerabilities, capacities and crisis impacts, the report explores SIDS' pandemic response and recovery processes – and their strengths and weaknesses – under three key headings, with accompanying recommendations.

## Core measures: Health, social protection and economic recovery

Even though coronavirus infection and mortality rates remained relatively low, healthcare sector capacity deficits were exposed in many SIDS as they could no longer refer or evacuate patients internationally and suffered medical supply and workforce shortages – impacting both COVID-19 patients and those with pre-existing conditions. Inequities manifested clearly in communities' and social groups' access to information about coronavirus, proximity and accessibility to healthcare facilities, and capacity to pay for private care. Monetary and in-kind measures to protect household incomes and enterprise continuity were common but often inadequate, particularly for SIDS' large informal sectors. SIDS communities displayed resilience by activating traditional alternatives to formal protection, for example, relocating to rural relatives or increasing local and urban food production. Domestic food production holds promises of self-reliance and healthier diets in SIDS but, as shown by the pandemic experience, requires sustainable land use management and upskilling among urban and young populations. Marco-economically, the pandemic highlighted the urgency of economic diversification and resilient and inclusive investments – objectives supported by many stimulus packages, but which remain high-priority. Digitalization similarly leapt during the pandemic, enabling safer work, trade and learning, yet completing this transformation requires continued policy support, infrastructure investments and skills development.

**> Recommendations**

- Invest in stronger **healthcare systems** that are accessible to all.
- Design more inclusive and resilient **social protection** systems, leveraging both formal and community-based approaches.
- Strengthen **urban and peri-urban food systems** for more reliable access to nutritious and affordable food.

- Promote **investment in sectors** with sightlines to sustainable growth, including areas of core comparative advantage and those offering diversification.

- Harness the momentum gained during the pandemic to advance **inclusive digitalization** of government, information, health, and education systems.

## Building resilient and inclusive cities and human settlements

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the urgent need for more resilient and inclusive cities and human settlements in SIDS, with poor and informal urban environments exacerbating the spread of disease and complicating containment efforts. Overcrowding, inadequate ventilation, insecure tenure, and weaknesses in water, sanitation and energy systems contributed to increased risks of transmission, eviction, and domestic violence. Public investments in housing, land, infrastructure, and basic services were sometimes paused at the onset of the crisis but renewed in later recovery efforts. Continuing this work is essential for SIDS communities to withstand future shocks and offers opportunities to apply pandemic lessons for building standards and sanitation alongside traditional and innovative practices for greener, more resilient buildings and urban environments.

The value of integrated spatial planning and design emerged as another key takeaway from the pandemic, highlighting the importance of strategically compact cities that harmonize relationships between built and natural environments, and humans and animals. For SIDS, this means engaging in context-specific urban planning and design to mitigate overcrowding, promote mixed and sustainable land use, and favour green and blue networks and nature-based solutions. Emphasizing the rural-urban nexus and the role of secondary cities can also guide future territorial planning in support of more balanced population distribution and strengthened local economies, building on pandemic-driven mobility and recognition of rural-urban interdependence as well as the potential of smaller cities to accommodate growth.

**> Recommendations**

- Prioritize health promoting and climate resilient upgrades of **housing and essential urban infrastructure in informal settlements**.

- Develop ambitious **national urban policies**, ensure clear roles related to urbanization within national governments, and embed **urban development in regional agendas**.

- Strengthen **spatial and land use planning** for risk-informed, sustainable and health promoting human settlement development.

- **Rethink neighbourhoods** for enhanced strategic compactness, mixed-use development and access to public green spaces and active mobility.

- Continue to prioritize **ecosystem-based adaptation (EbA) and nature-based solutions (NbS)** for adaptive urban and community development.

## From grassroots to global: Multilevel governance and finance

The pandemic underscored the importance of multilevel governance in crisis response and long-term resilience across SIDS. Local communities and organizations demonstrated unique strengths, leveraging traditional practices and social networks to deliver context-specific solutions – underscoring the need for their systematic inclusion in disaster risk reduction and development efforts. Local governments, positioned at the frontlines of the pandemic response, made commendable efforts to protect communities, yet displayed capacity and resource constraints. This has prompted renewed attention to strengthening national-local collaboration, enhancing local fiscal positions, and bolstering risk management capacity. Embedding local and urban development priorities more deliberately within national policies and regional strategies could further accelerate multilevel collaboration for settlement resilience building.

Regional and international partnerships played a pivotal role in facilitating pandemic-time knowledge exchange, coordinated protection efforts, and shared policy responses. Looking ahead, advancing regional cooperation through joint project development, innovative financing mechanisms, and strategic advocacy can unlock greater access to concessional external finance – a persistent barrier to resilient development in SIDS. To play its part, the international community can scale up and simplify access to bi- and multilateral funding and aid collection of robust risk data to inform more strategic interventions. Building on pandemic lessons, coordinated, multilevel action across all levels of government, civil society, and development partners is essential to ensure no one is left behind amid compounding climate, economic, and health challenges.

**> Recommendations**

- Meaningfully and inclusively **engage communities** in resilience building efforts and support community-based solutions to resilience.

- Bolster the **capacity of local governments**, lifting fiscal positions, building workforce skills, and harmonizing traditional and formal governance systems.

- Recognize and rectify **gender inequalities** in communities and governments, promoting women's participation in decision-making at all levels.

- Continue to strengthen **regional and global knowledge sharing, collaboration and advocacy**, focusing on common challenges and opportunities such as climate change and urbanization.

- Enable greater access among SIDS to **concessional finance**: expand debt relief, evolve traditional and innovative financing vehicles, and protect remittances.

- Enhance capacity for **data collection and management** that capture layered vulnerabilities and multiple risks.

**Figure 1. Residential tin houses in Fiji.**

Source: Nick Schmidt / Unsplash

# Introduction

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As this report is published, it is two years ago since the WHO declared that COVID-19 was no longer a public health emergency of international concern. This presents an important moment to take stock of recovery measures and reflect on their achievements for resilience building, sustainable development, and social justice. The pandemic represented at once an unprecedented crisis, and a rare opportunity to catalyze difficult change and transform economic, social, and environmental systems. Its response and recovery inspired simultaneous innovation, from digital technologies to medical solutions, and a return to viable but neglected traditional practices, spanning food production to social protection. It evidenced the connection between urban planning and design and public health, and spurred many shifts in urban form to mitigate contagion while also making cities more prosperous, green and fair.

COVID-19 was far from an isolated health crisis: the pandemic sent shockwaves through economic, social, and environmental systems, underscoring their deep interconnectedness and vulnerability, from the local level to the global. While a medical solution has effectively tamed the virus, learnings from the pandemic stretch far beyond vaccine labs. The ways societies were or were not able to respond and recover offer critical insights across sectors. The years that have elapsed and the benefit of hindsight allow us now to document learnings, good practices, and recommendations for the post-pandemic era, which is set to deliver new social, economic and environmental challenges.

The nature of the pandemic as much more than a public health crisis was evident in SIDS. Their geographical isolation to a relatively great extent sheltered SIDS from escalating COVID-19 case and mortality rates. Nonetheless, the disruption wreaked by the global pandemic response to domestic activity and international trade and tourism had far-reaching economic and social ramifications. The reliance of many SIDS on a few highly impacted sectors and on imports triggered major macroeconomic slowdowns, while unemployment increased significantly in most countries, and food insecurity rose sharply.

Worst affected were groups with pre-existing vulnerabilities: those in the informal sector without social protection cover, women with care duties, and the growing young generation facing a lack of opportunities already before the crisis. Meanwhile, island populations suffering from pre-existing health issues – commonly non-communicable diseases – experienced heightened health risks combined with reduced access to treatment given new competition for scarce healthcare resources. The factors that made SIDS vulnerable to the impacts of the pandemic in many cases coincide with those making them highly vulnerable to climate change. For SIDS, the health and climate crises were compound phenomena, both driving economic and livelihood disruption, food insecurity and wide-ranging loss and damage.

If the impacts of the pandemic were multi-fold and intertwined – exposing the complex connections between spheres of human life, economic sectors, and levels of decision-making – then so were its most effective responses. Evolving in the aftermath of the pandemic has been a recognition that policymaking and action need to adequately account for these interlinkages and address issues more comprehensively. A greater commitment to serving mutually beneficial relationships between humans, animals, and the environment to enable more jointly resilient economies, societies, and ecosystems, for example, has motived the prominent rise of concepts such as One Health and Planetary Health, and approaches such as EbA and NbS.

Cities and human settlements, as complex systems, manifest both multi-faceted, interconnected risks and strong opportunities for integrated crisis response and development solutions. In SIDS, poorly planned and regulated urbanization has contributed to heightened climate and health vulnerabilities, especially in informal settlements. Area-based or territorial approaches to crisis response and investment in housing, basic urban services and infrastructure, at the same time, have strong potential to facilitate strategic and coordinated development. Underpinning all such integrated policymaking and action needs to be a robust understanding of multilayered vulnerabilities and dynamic multi-hazard risks. Integrated solutions are especially critical in the context of SIDS, which continue to face myriad challenges, yet have limited resources to address them.

This report seeks to synthesize learnings from the pandemic response and recovery in SIDS with a special focus on cities and human settlements. It asks whether SIDS have emerged from the pandemic as more sustainable, resilient, and socially just systems, and offers recommendations to inform their future development and efforts to withstand new and intensified shocks and stresses.

The report represents the culmination of the project 'Strengthened Capacities of African, Caribbean and Pacific SIDS for Green, Resilient and Pro-poor Pandemic Recovery', implemented by UN-Habitat in partnership with SIDS stakeholders over the past three years. The project involved normative and operational engagement across African, Caribbean and Pacific SIDS, supporting their green, resilient, and pro-poor pandemic recovery, while also enabling insights into key challenges and opportunities faced across the three regions in achieving this end. A report capturing learnings and recommendations has been produced for each of the three SIDS regions. This report draws on these – as well as on supplementary grey and academic literature and insights from UN-Habitat in-country experts – to synthesize and elevate main take-aways and facilitate South-South, North-South and triangular learning. Case studies presented in boxes throughout the report illustrate the intricate bond of this research with practice and projects, highlighting the creativity and positive impact of existing solutions developed in SIDS.

**Figure 2. Coastal settlement in Bubaque, Guinea-Bissau.**

Source: UN-Habitat

## Box 1: Strengthened Capacities of African, Caribbean and Pacific SIDS for Green, Resilient and Pro-poor Pandemic Recovery

**Project timeline:** 2022 – 2025

**Project partners:** United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), United Nations Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States (UN-OHRLLS)

**Donor:** United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Development Account

The project 'Strengthened Capacities of African, Caribbean and Pacific SIDS for Green, Resilient and Pro-poor Pandemic Recovery' is situated within the framework of UN-Habitat's flagship programme 'Resilient Settlements for the Urban Poor' (RISE UP). Key to the RISE UP approach is the engagement of multiple sectors, the viewing of cities as complex systems, and the transformative understanding of informal settlements as pivotal, contributing elements of urban prosperity.

To confront the triple global challenges of rising inequality, the climate crisis, and the COVID-19 health crisis – and their multifaceted repercussions – this project has aimed to strengthen the capacity of African, Caribbean and Pacific SIDS for a green, resilient, and pro-poor recovery.

It has done so by facilitating technical skills training focused on data collection and risk mapping, multi-stakeholder workshops on the development of recovery plans, local and national vulnerability assessments, and design of concrete resilience strategies, recovery action frameworks, and transformative project proposals. In focus for this work have been Comoros and São Tomé and Príncipe in Africa, Antigua and Barbuda and St Lucia in the Caribbean, and Fiji and the Solomon Islands in the Pacific, where communities, governments, and broad stakeholder groups have been engaged on the ground.

At the regional level, the project has provided opportunities for learning and exchange through capacity building workshops and webinars on project development, innovative financing, and action planning for city-wide inclusive and low-carbon resilience building. The three regional reports prepared to capture learnings, good practices and recommendations for crisis recovery and resilience offer opportunities for intra-regional learning, while this global report paves the way to inter-regional exchange and broader South-South, North-South and triangular collaboration.

Ultimately, the work has seen partner cities, communities, and national governments across African, Caribbean and Pacific SIDS build capacity to create the conditions for enhanced resilience, sustainability, and inclusion from the local level to the global.

# Setting the scene: SIDS vulnerabilities, capacities and crisis impacts

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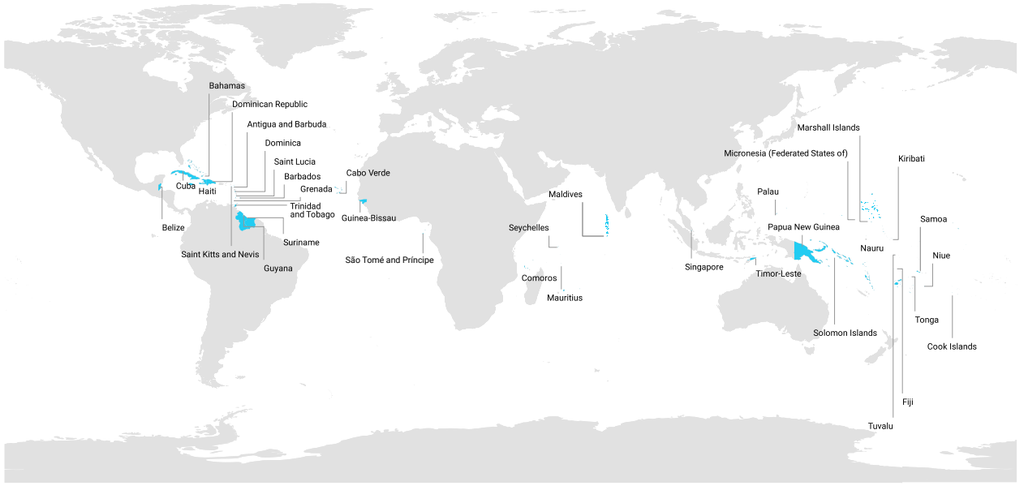
**Map 1. Small Island Developing States (SIDS)**




Source: UN Geospatial Hub & UN UN OHRLLS

## Introducing SIDS: Common denominators and COVID-19 impact

### SIDS' general features and shared interests

SIDS are a distinct yet diverse group of 57 countries dotted across the Atlantic, Pacific and Indian Oceans and the Caribbean, Mediterranean and South China Seas (UN OHRLLS, n.d.). They share a number of commonalities, motivating their recognition as a 'special case' within the international community since the Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit of 1992 (UN DESA, n.d.). SIDS are generally small, their limited land mass and natural resource endowment placing confines on their economies of scale, productive capacity and scope to respond to demographic pressures. Singapore, the Maldives and Mauritius are among the most densely populated countries in the world and many SIDS see human settlements concentrated on narrow stretches of land (World Bank, 2025a), an issue often exacerbated by rapid and unplanned urbanization (UN-Habitat, 2015).

As islands, SIDS are often situated far from other countries and international financing sources, surrounded by vast seas and oceans. While a recent multi-indicator classification ranks SIDS as less remote than for example Least Developed Countries (LDCs), it maintains their status as the country group the furthest away from financing sources (Cantu-Bazaldua, 2021). SIDS also share many characteristics with developing countries, and several are among the world's least developed. This includes high population growth unmatched by commensurate institutional strength, economic stability and opportunities, and infrastructure and service delivery capacity (Sachs et al., 2022).

While linked by these shared characteristics, SIDS display important diversity, both between and within

their sub-regions. There are SIDS as small as 20 km2, and others reaching 450,000 km2 (World Bank, 2025b). Their populations range from 10,000 to over 10 million (World Bank 2025c). Economically, some SIDS defy 'developing' classification: most are middle-income countries, but some have high-income economies. Many SIDS' economies are heavily reliant on services such as tourism, while others are largely natural resource extraction-based (Foley et al., 2022). Though on average highly remote, the Pacific SIDS are considered more remote than their African peers, who in turn out-rank the Caribbean SIDS (Cantu-Bazaldua, 2021) which enjoy greater proximity to the continent and major markets. A small number of SIDS are not island states but coastal nations.

Cultural and linguistic diversity characterize SIDS at the global level but also the regional and national (Curtis, 2011). The African SIDS region displays particular internal differences, to the point that it is often seen as a 'no-region'. Not only are these SIDS situated on different sides of the African continent, they also find themselves in different language families and income groups, with different modern-day political histories. The absence of a shared regional narrative presents obstacles to dialogue and collaboration among these African SIDS. (UN-Habitat, 2025). In the Caribbean, there is similarly a partial disconnect between English- and Spanish-speaking SIDS, resulting in under-utilization of experience sharing and good practice scaling. At the same time, SIDS across the globe have demonstrated admirable capacity for pioneering regional cooperation mechanisms, and global advocacy and leadership, in areas such as climate change adaptation and ocean stewardship (UN GA, 2024).

**Table 1. SIDS population size, land area, and population density[1].**

| Country | Population (2023) | Land area (km2, 2022) | Population per km2 |
|---|---|---|---|
| **African SIDS** | | | |
| Cabo Verde | 522,331 | 4,030 | 130 |
| Comoros | 850,387 | 1,861 | 457 |
| Guinea-Bissau | 2,153,339 | 28,120 | 77 |
| Mauritius | 1,261,041 | 1,997 | 631 |
| São Tomé and Príncipe | 230,871 | 960 | 240 |
| Seychelles | 119,773 | 460 | 260 |
| **Caribbean SIDS** | | | |
| Antigua and Barbuda | 93,316 | 440 | 212 |
| Aruba | 107,359 | 180 | 596 |
| Bahamas | 399,440 | 10,010 | 40 |
| Barbados | 282,336 | 430 | 657 |
| Belize | 411,106 | 22,810 | 18 |
| Bermuda | 64,698 | 54 | 1,198 |
| British Virgin Islands | 38,985 | 150 | 260 |
| Cayman Islands | 73,038 | 240 | 304 |
| Cuba | 11,019,931 | 103,800 | 106 |
| Curacao | 147,862 | 444 | 333 |
| Dominica | 66,510 | 750 | 89 |
| Dominican Republic | 11,331,265 | 48,198 | 235 |
| Grenada | 117,081 | 340 | 344 |
| Guyana | 826,353 | 196,850 | 4 |
| Haiti | 11,637,398 | 27,560 | 422 |
| **Caribbean SIDS** | | | |
| Haiti | 11,637,398 | 27,560 | 422 |
| Jamaica | 2,839,786 | 10,830 | 262 |
| Saint Kitts and Nevis | 46,758 | 260 | 180 |
| Saint Lucia | 179,285 | 610 | 294 |
| Puerto Rico | 3,205,691 | 8,870 | 361 |
| Sint Maarten (Dutch part) | 42,749 | 34 | 1,257 |
| Suriname | 628,886 | 160,507 | 4 |
| Trinidad and Tobago | 1,367,510 | 5,130 | 267 |
| Turks and Caicos Islands | 46,198 | 950 | 49 |
| Saint Vincent and the Grenadines | 101,323 | 390 | 260 |
| Virgin Islands (U.S.) | 104,917 | 350 | 300 |
| **Pacific SIDS** | | | |
| American Samoa | 47,521 | 200 | 238 |
| Fiji | 924,145 | 18,270 | 51 |
| French Polynesia | 281,118 | 3,471 | 81 |
| Guam | 166,506 | 540 | 308 |
| Kiribati | 132,530 | 810 | 164 |
| Marshall Islands | 38,827 | 180 | 216 |
| Micronesia (Federated States of) | 112,630 | 700 | 161 |
| Nauru | 11,875 | 20 | 594 |
| Northern Mariana Islands | 45,143 | 460 | 98 |
| New Caledonia | 289,870 | 18,280 | 16 |
| Palau | 17,727 | 460 | 39 |
| Papua New Guinea | 10,389,635 | 452,860 | 23 |
| Samoa | 216,663 | 2,780 | 78 |
| Solomon Islands | 800,005 | 27,990 | 29 |
| Tonga | 104,597 | 720 | 145 |
| Tuvalu | 9,816 | 30 | 327 |
| Vanuatu | 320,409 | 12,190 | 26 |
| **Other SIDS** | | | |
| Maldives | 525,994 | 300 | 1,753 |
| Singapore | 5,917,648 | 718 | 8,242 |
| Timor-Leste | 1,384,286 | 14,870 | 93 |

Source: World Bank, 2025b; 2025c.

**1.** For all tables and figures, UN OHRLLS (n.d.) informs the list of SIDS. Countries are not included for which data is not available.

Much of this joint action and leadership are motivated by recognition of SIDS' shared challenges and opportunities. Some of their common features make it difficult for SIDS to achieve sustainable development and leave them uniquely vulnerable to shocks (Sachs et al., 2022). One study classed SIDS as 35 per cent more vulnerable to external shocks than their non-SIDS counterparts (Allam, 2022). International financial volatility and economic downturns together with the slow- and rapid onset effects of climate change are major threats to SIDS' socioeconomic and environmental systems. Recognizing their vulnerability is not tantamount to claiming that SIDS exhibit weakness – as outlined in this report and elsewhere, they display significant initiative, creativity and power – but it means acknowledging a need for special attention and resources to support resilience building.

**COVID-19 impacts in SIDS**

SIDS were heavily impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Though in many cases spared the devastating infection and mortality rates experienced by other countries thanks to their remote and insular geographies, SIDS felt the economic and social reverberations of COVID-19 acutely. Many SIDS introduced effective stay-at-home orders and border closures early in the pandemic – in some cases aided by practice from natural disasters (Hambleton et al., 2020) – and succeeded in keeping initial case numbers low (Leal Filho et al., 2020). When travel restrictions were eased and tourism resumed alongside repatriation of overseas nationals, however, infection rates rose in several countries (Sachs, 2021; Telesford, 2021). Critically, movement restrictions and social distancing measures along with global disruptions to tourism, international trade and exchanges also triggered macro-, micro-, and socioeconomic shocks (UN-Habitat, 2020a).

**Table 2. COVID-19 cases and deaths in SIDS, cumulative as of 9 February 2025.**

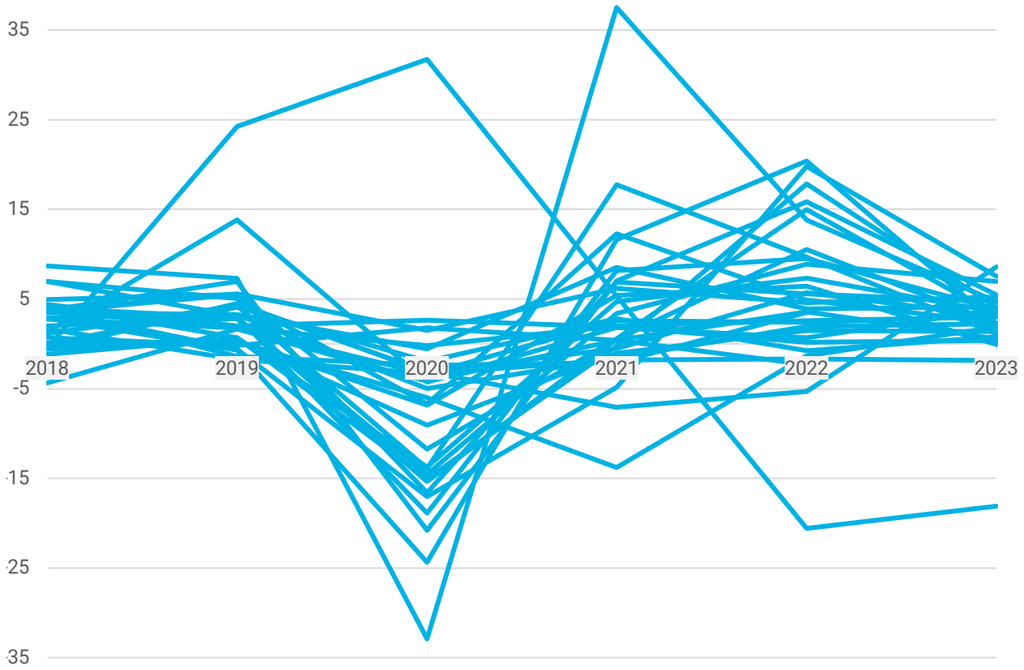
| | Cases | Cases as portion of population | Deaths | Deaths as portion of population |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **African SIDS** | | | | |
| Cabo Verde | 64,474 | 12.3% | 417 | 0.08% |
| Comoros | 9,109 | 1.1% | 160 | 0.02% |
| Guinea-Bissau | 9,614 | 0.4% | 177 | 0.01% |
| Mauritius | 331,426 | 26.3% | 1,074 | 0.09% |
| São Tomé and Príncipe | 6,771 | 2.9% | 80 | 0.03% |
| Seychelles | 51,899 | 43.3% | 172 | 0.14% |
| **Caribbean SIDS** | | | | |
| Antigua and Barbuda | 9,106 | 9.8% | 146 | 0.16% |
| Aruba | 44,224 | 41.2% | 292 | 0.27% |
| Barbados | 108,839 | 38.5% | 593 | 0.21% |
| Belize | 71,432 | 17.4% | 688 | 0.17% |
| Bermuda | 18,860 | 29.2% | 165 | 0.26% |
| British Virgin Islands | 7,644 | 19.6% | 64 | 0.16% |
| Cayman Islands | 31,472 | 43.1% | 37 | 0.05% |
| Cuba | 1,113,662 | 10.1% | 8,530 | 0.08% |
| Dominica | 16,047 | 24.1% | 74 | 0.11% |
| Dominican Republic | 661,103 | 5.8% | 4,384 | 0.04% |
| Grenada | 19,693 | 16.8% | 238 | 0.20% |
| Guyana | 74,500 | 9.0% | 1,302 | 0.16% |
| Haiti | 34,772 | 0.3% | 860 | 0.01% |
| Jamaica | 157,360 | 5.5% | 3,621 | 0.13% |
| Puerto Rico | 1,252,713 | 39.1% | 5,938 | 0.19% |
| Sint Maarten (Dutch part) | 11,051 | 25.9% | 92 | 0.22% |
| Suriname | 82,507 | 13.1% | 1,406 | 0.22% |
| Trinidad and Tobago | 191,496 | 14.0% | 4,390 | 0.32% |
| Turks and Caicos Islands | 6,846 | 14.8% | 40 | 0.09% |
| **Pacific SIDS** | | | | |
| American Samoa | 8,359 | 17.6% | 34 | 0.07% |
| Fiji | 69,047 | 7.5% | 885 | 0.10% |
| French Polynesia | 79,451 | 28.3% | 650 | 0.23% |
| Guam | 52,287 | 31.4% | 419 | 0.25% |
| Kiribati | 5,085 | 3.8% | 24 | 0.02% |
| Marshall Islands | 16,297 | 42.0% | 17 | 0.04% |
| Nauru | 5,393 | 45.4% | 1 | 0.01% |
| New Caledonia | 80,203 | 27.7% | 314 | 0.11% |
| Northern Mariana Islands | 14,985 | 33.2% | 41 | 0.09% |
| Palau | 6,372 | 35.9% | 10 | 0.06% |
| Papua New Guinea | 46,864 | 0.5% | 670 | 0.01% |
| Samoa | 17,057 | 7.9% | 31 | 0.01% |
| Solomon Islands | 25,954 | 3.2% | 199 | 0.02% |
| Tonga | 16,992 | 16.2% | 13 | 0.01% |
| Tuvalu | 2,943 | 30.0% | 1 | 0.01% |
| Vanuatu | 12,019 | 3.8% | 14 | 0.00% |
| **Other SIDS** | | | | |
| Maldives | 186,694 | 35.5% | 316 | 0.06% |
| Singapore | 3,006,155 | 50.8% | 2,024 | 0.03% |
| Timor-Leste | 23,460 | 1.7% | 138 | 0.01% |

Source: WHO, 2025.

In 2020, UNCTAD (2021) observed a 70 per cent decrease in travel receipts across SIDS and estimated that the sector would take four years to recover. COVID-19 hamstrung government investment, putting ongoing projects on hold and reducing capacity for further capital spending (Thomas et al., 2020). Figure 1 shows the significant dip in SIDS' gross domestic product (GDP) growth associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Tuvalu, for example, experienced GDP growth of 13.8 per cent in 2019, and negative growth of -4.3 per cent in 2020, followed by a moderate recovery in the years after. In April 2021, the debt burden of SIDS was 72.4 per cent of GDP, compared to a pre-pandemic figure of 62 per cent (in turn comparable to the 29 per cent average among inland developing economies) (Bouhia & Wilkinson, 2021).

Unemployment rose across many SIDS, with the most significant livelihood losses often felt by those in the informal sector and vulnerable communities. In Antigua and Barbuda, for example, pandemic unemployment reached almost 30 per cent, owing largely to tourism sector disruptions. Women in the country were particularly impacted by labour market shocks on account of their pre-existing job insecurities, their sectors of work, and the high prevalence of women heads of poor households (UNDP et al., 2020a). In Fiji, it is estimated that among 40 per cent of households in informal settlements at least one person lost their job, and 84 per cent of households experienced reduced income (UN-Habitat, 2020b). In the Solomon Islands, gender disparities in income loss were evident again, with 52 per cent of households having a woman as the main earner reporting reduced income, compared to 39 per cent for male breadwinner households (UN-Habitat, 2020c).

**Figure 3. GDP growth trends in SIDS (per cent), 2018-2023**




Source: World Bank, 2025d. Note: SIDS as a group experienced the largest GDP contraction among least developed countries (LDCs), landlocked developing countries, and overseas development assistance (ODA) eligible countries (excluding SIDS) in 2020 (OECD, 2021)

In Comoros, 77 per cent of households reported adverse impacts on livelihoods, and 54 per cent reported loss of over 40 per cent of labour income, as the pandemic hit while the effects of Cyclone Kenneth were still being felt (Soulé Youssouf, 2021). Job losses and, for informal sector workers especially, a lack of social safety nets, exacerbated poverty in many SIDS. In St Lucia, for example, close to half of the population was deemed poor as a result of unemployment caused by the pandemic (UNDP et al., 2020b). The growing young populations in SIDS were among those hit the hardest by the economic slowdown, suffering already prior to the pandemic from a lack of opportunities.

While exposure to the COVID-19 virus was limited or delayed in SIDS, the pandemic was not without negative health impacts in island countries. Those contracting coronavirus in SIDS often faced a lack of adequate testing and treatment facilities, and heightened risks due to prevalent pre-existing issues with asthma, diabetes, obesity and vector-borne disease (UN-Habitat, 2024). Such underlying health problems were in many cases aggravated by a diversion of efforts and resources to deal with the new virus. Food security was also threatened as imports slowed with disruptions to international trade and supply chains and a reduction in foreign exchange earnings. This was a critical issue for SIDS, half of which import more than 80 per cent of their food and many of which experience high rates of both malnutrition and diet-related non-communicable diseases (FAO, 2020).

Overall, the pandemic presented a roadblock to achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in SIDS across the globe, amplifying pre-existing development challenges. SIDS face significant hurdles in delivering on all SDGs but are particularly behind in addressing extreme poverty, securing access to quality services and infrastructure, maintaining strong institutions, and protecting biodiversity (Sachs et al., 2022). At the same time, the pandemic has been framed as an opportunity to "reset entrenched systems" and to "catalyze difficult change" in SIDS (Foley et al., 2022, p 2.). In this way, SIDS' COVID-19 journeys present an important moment for learning and reflection to identify priorities for their more resilient, green, and pro-poor futures.

## Climate risks in SIDS

High exposure and vulnerability to the adverse impacts of climate change are key shared characteristics of SIDS across the globe. Their geography has always made SIDS susceptible to hydro-meteorological and geophysical hazards – beyond being small low-lying islands, they are mostly located in the tropics and on or near tectonic plate boundaries, with hills and mountains enfolded by steep and sometimes unstable slopes (Bishop et al., 2021). Hurricanes, cyclones, flooding, landslides, and tsunamis are common experiences, and some intensifying in frequency and severity with climate change (IPCC, 2019; Wilkinson et al., 2018).

Hurricanes account for some 95 per cent of natural disaster-related damages in the Caribbean (Burgess et al., 2018). In 2017, Hurricane Irma damaged or destroyed 90 per cent or more of structures on Barbuda and Saint Martin (Cangialosi et al., 2018), only to be followed two weeks later in the northeast Caribbean by Hurricane Maria: one of the deadliest of its kind so far (Vosper et al., 2020). Intensity 4 and 5 storms are set to increase by 13 per cent in the Caribbean under a 2°C global warming scenario (Spencer & Strobl, 2020). Pacific SIDS too experience growing risks associated with climate change-related extreme events, including severe storms and cyclones, erosion and landslides, flooding and storm surges, and temperature extremes (UN-Habitat, 2020a). African SIDS face diverse hazards, being highly vulnerable to, among others, hurricanes, cyclones, floods, droughts, and landslides. In 2019, Cyclone Kenneth affected almost 350,000 people in the Comoros – a country of 800,000 inhabitants – and in 2024, Cyclone Belal cut off electricity for a third of Mauritius' households and severely limited water access for 17 per cent for several days (UN-Habitat, 2025).

Beyond rapid-onset extreme events, climate change is contributing to sea-level rise, coastal erosion, salinization, temperature rise, coral bleaching, and drought in SIDS (Thomas et al., 2020). These impacts are no less serious than rapid-onset hazards. Given SIDS low-lying nature, sea-level rise poses an existential threat to several countries (UN-Habitat, 2020a). Some islands have already been lost in the Solomon Islands and the Federated States of Micronesia, and others are experiencing rapid land loss (Thomas et al., 2020). African SIDS

are also seeing sandy beaches progressively erased by sea-level rise and coastal erosion, jeopardizing their vital appeal to tourists (UN-Habitat, 2025).

Unsurprisingly, the secondary economic impacts of global warming are major for SIDS. Extreme events trigger significant costs, such as the loss of 225 per cent of annual GDP in Dominica as a result of Hurricane Maria (Government of Dominica, 2018) or the 64 per cent of GDP cost to Vanuatu of Cyclone Pam in 2015 (Thomas et al., 2017). Tropical cyclones alone cost the Caribbean and the Pacific an estimated $835 million and $178 million USD respectively each year and, overall, SIDS are expected to lose 20 times more of their capital stock annually due to disasters than European countries (UNDRR, 2015). Coastal cities and human settlements in particular face loss and damage as sea-level rise and extreme events affect critical urban infrastructure and homes which tend to be concentrated here (UN-Habitat, 2015). Tourism, fisheries, and agriculture are all sectors highly sensitive to climate change, and which constitute the backbone of most SIDS' economies (Monnereau, 2017; Mycoo, 2018). The island nations boast of rich and unique flora and fauna which both attract tourists and support ways of life and livelihoods, but which rely on the maintenance of an enabling climate and environment (Hugues, 2018).

The effects of climate change in SIDS, then, have many commonalities with the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, including disruption of economic activity and loss of livelihoods, increased food and water insecurity, and a rise in infectious disease and mortality rates. For SIDS, the climate crisis and the pandemic were compound events which exacerbated many social, economic, and environmental issues. Several SIDS recorded climate change-related extreme events during the pandemic, such as Tropical Cyclones Harold and Yasa which hit the Pacific in 2020, displacing thousands who were left struggling to access shelters, water, and sanitation to protect them from the virus (Foley et al., 2022; UN-Habitat, 2020b).

Similarly, the underlying vulnerabilities of SIDS to climate change and to the pandemic have much in common (UN-Habitat, 2020a). Many countries lack capacity to create and maintain resilient infrastructure and responsive service systems (Bishop et al., 2021) and, indeed, a breakdown of the components of climate risk reveal that SIDS are significantly set back by "lack of adaptive capacities", comprising capacities for research, education, investment, and long-term health and deprivation effects (see Table 3). Resilient housing, infrastructure and services become especially critical in SIDS given the concentration of populations on narrow strips of coastal land combined with geographic isolation (de Paula & Hosein, 2024).

Informal urban settlements – explored in greater detail below – display particularly significant deficits across these sectors (UN-Habitat, 2020a).

**Table 3. 2024 World Risk Index (WRI) scores for SIDS[2].**

| | WRI score | Exposure | Vulnerability | Susceptibility | Coping | Adaptation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **African SIDS** | | | | | | |
| Cabo Verde | 1.17 | 0.07 | 19.71 | 14.92 | 10.73 | 47.84 |
| Comoros | 2.68 | 0.33 | 21.72 | 12.51 | 14.5 | 56.51 |
| Guinea-Bissau | 3.55 | 0.67 | 18.84 | 14.1 | 7.04 | 67.37 |
| Mauritius | 3.58 | 0.73 | 17.59 | 13.4 | 9.6 | 42.3 |
| São Tomé and Príncipe | 0.67 | 0.02 | 22.26 | 16.56 | 12.79 | 52.07 |
| Seychelles | 2.57 | 1.03 | 6.39 | 4.25 | 2.38 | 25.81 |
| **Caribbean SIDS** | | | | | | |
| Antigua and Barbuda | 2.9 | 1.2 | 7 | 8.44 | 2.58 | 15.77 |
| Bahamas | 4.82 | 1.51 | 15.36 | 8.97 | 9.64 | 41.88 |
| Barbados | 2.46 | 0.48 | 12.65 | 5.46 | 8.6 | 43.12 |
| Belize | 7.97 | 2.5 | 25.44 | 27.78 | 12.61 | 47.02 |
| Cuba | 7.8 | 4.57 | 13.31 | 13.12 | 10.24 | 17.54 |
| Dominica | 2.69 | 0.79 | 9.17 | 7.16 | 2.47 | 43.62 |
| Dominican Republic | 13.33 | 7.05 | 25.2 | 27.78 | 12.5 | 46.06 |
| Grenada | 1.82 | 0.31 | 10.74 | 11.37 | 2.58 | 42.18 |
| Guyana | 7.35 | 2.63 | 20.55 | 18.39 | 11.67 | 40.44 |
| Haiti | 9.96 | 2.78 | 35.71 | 44.06 | 14.65 | 70.55 |
| Jamaica | 3.4 | 1.1 | 10.54 | 8.86 | 2.89 | 45.7 |
| Saint Kitts and Nevis | 2.14 | 0.53 | 8.61 | 8.47 | 2.48 | 30.38 |
| Saint Lucia | 2.83 | 0.46 | 17.4 | 11.6 | 10.04 | 45.23 |
| Saint Vincent and the Grenadines | 2.63 | 0.43 | 16.04 | 11.09 | 9.5 | 39.15 |
| Suriname | 6.76 | 1.78 | 25.7 | 26.73 | 11.45 | 55.45 |
| Trinidad and Tobago | 3 | 0.49 | 18.34 | 12.41 | 11.32 | 43.93 |
| **Pacific SIDS** | | | | | | |
| Micronesia (Federated States of) | 4.44 | 1.12 | 17.62 | 9.92 | 10.97 | 50.23 |
| Fiji | 6.7 | 2.79 | 16.07 | 20.62 | 11.55 | 17.43 |
| Kiribati | 2.81 | 0.69 | 11.45 | 9.93 | 2.88 | 52.44 |
| Marshall Islands | 3.12 | 0.5 | 19.51 | 16.36 | 10.36 | 43.83 |
| Nauru | 1.02 | 0.11 | 9.39 | 8.48 | 2.79 | 34.97 |
| Palau | 2.02 | 0.36 | 11.35 | 6.58 | 9.49 | 23.44 |
| Papua New Guinea | 26.35 | 18.84 | 36.84 | 57.46 | 13.59 | 64.04 |
| Samoa | 3.23 | 0.81 | 12.88 | 15.24 | 2.59 | 54.18 |
| Solomon Islands | 14.74 | 9.62 | 22.57 | 17.83 | 12.42 | 51.89 |
| Tonga | 4.02 | 1.33 | 12.13 | 12.89 | 11.5 | 12.03 |
| Tuvalu | 1.53 | 0.15 | 15.54 | 9.26 | 10.6 | 38.24 |
| Vanuatu | 11.58 | 5.8 | 23.12 | 17.84 | 12.18 | 56.86 |
| **Other SIDS** | | | | | | |
| Maldives | 1.11 | 0.11 | 11.12 | 9.52 | 9.89 | 14.62 |
| Singapore | 0.8 | 0.15 | 4.25 | 3.83 | 0.83 | 24.11 |
| Timor-Leste | 7.55 | 2.93 | 19.46 | 10.71 | 12.45 | 55.27 |
| **SIDS average** | 5.06 | 2.07 | 16.80 | 14.97 | 8.82 | 41.99 |
| **Classification** | Medium | High | Medium | Medium | Low | Medium |

Source: Alliance Development Helps, 2025

**2.** Note: Exposure is defined as the extent to which populations are exposed to and burdened by the impacts of earthquakes, tsunamis, coastal and riverine floodings, cyclones, droughts, and sea level rise. Vulnerability is composed of three dimensions: i) susceptibility describes structural characteristics and conditions of a society that increase the overall likelihood that populations will suffer damage from extreme natural events and enter a disaster situation; ii) coping involves various capacities and actions of societies to counter negative impacts of natural hazards and climate change through direct actions and available resources in the form of formal or informal activities, and to minimize damage in the immediate aftermath of an event; iii) adaptation refers to long-term processes and strategies to achieve anticipatory changes in societal structures and systems to counter, mitigate, or purposefully avoid future adverse impacts.

As land becomes scarcer due to a combination of climate change impacts and demographic and socio-economic factors, SIDS' populations are increasingly forced to settle in highly hazard-prone areas such as waterfronts, riverbanks, and hill slopes, where provision of adequate basic services is often lacking.

The impacts of climate change in SIDS are also gender differentiated, owing to gender differences in terms of access to natural resources, land ownership, participation in decision-making and income generation, roles in caretaking, and engagement with education and information (Tandrayen-Ragoobur et al., 2024; UN-Habitat, 2020b). Women were especially affected by Pacific Tropical Cyclones Harold and Yasa during the pandemic in 2020, bearing the additional burden of care and facing heightened risks of gender-based violence in evacuation shelters (UN-Habitat, 2020b). A survey of informal settlements reveals that 82 per cent of respondents in Fiji were impacted by a tropical cyclone during the first year of COVID-19 (UN-Habitat, 2020c), while 78 per cent of women and 22 per cent of men in the Solomon Islands were affected by extreme events in the same time period (UN-Habitat, 2020d).

Despite SIDS contributing a negligible share to global greenhouse gas emissions, it is worth highlighting that many of them, while being vulnerable to climate change, are simultaneously highly reliant on fossil fuels. Emissions per capita vary with levels of development but are generally the highest in urban areas due to their concentration of economic activity, transport, and buildings. A lack of finance, capacity for operation and maintenance, and dated infrastructure, are among the factors behind a lack of investment in renewables, despite their strong potential in SIDS. Currently, aging power infrastructure drives up fuel use while also contributing to low electrification rates and frequent power outages, with issues especially clear in rural areas and informal settlements. Resilience on plant-based materials to meet household fuel needs creates health issues from indoor air pollution and places a burden on women who are often tasked with firewood collection (UN-Habitat, 2020). Building resilience to the adverse impacts of climate change and other crises is urgent in SIDS, but a green transition, then, also has significant socio-economic co-benefits to offer.

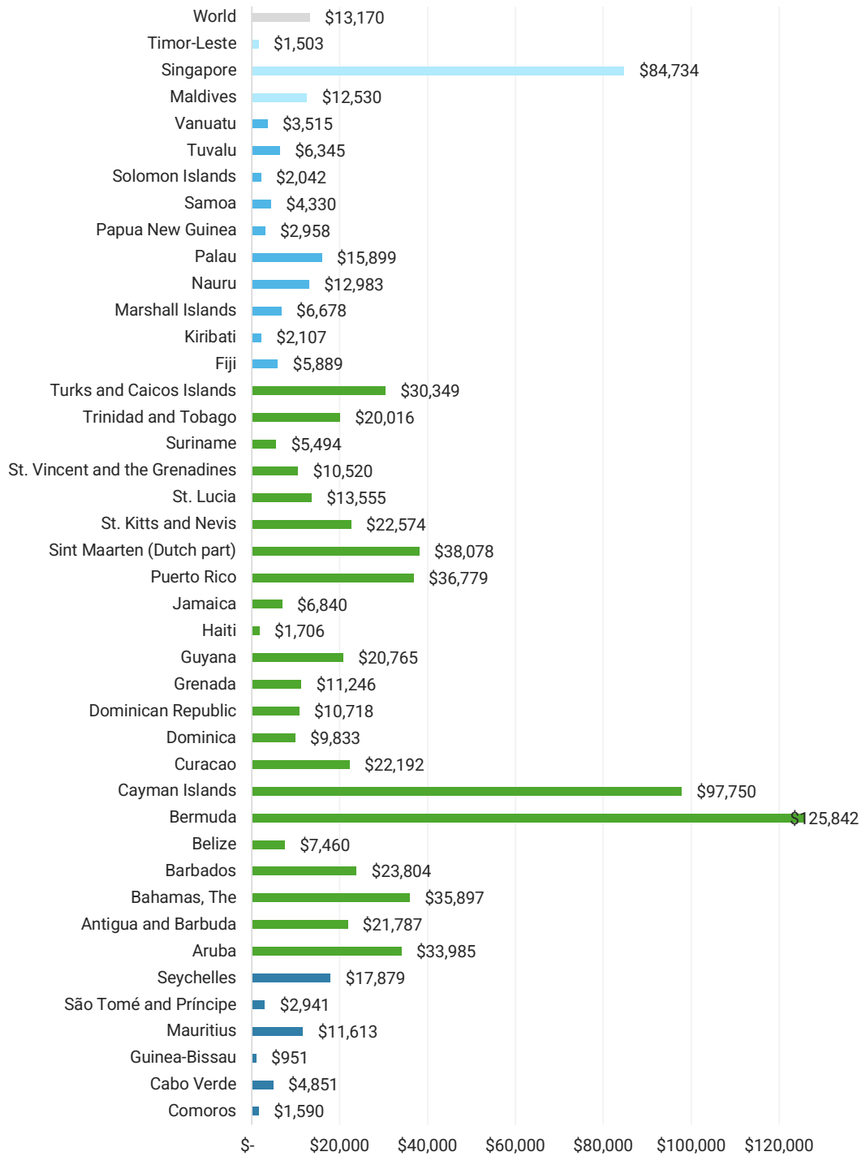
## SIDS' social and economic vulnerabilities

Clearly, social and economic factors are important mediators of how SIDS experience crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change. SIDS' macroeconomic challenges stem largely from structural constraints in the form of narrow resource bases, small land masses and population sizes, and remoteness, which are tied to low diversification, high reliance on imports and remittances, and high costs of production, service delivery and exports (Bishop et al., 2021; Galaitsi et al., 2023). These characteristics contributed greatly to the economic suffering of SIDS as a result of the international trade and travel slow-down associated with the pandemic. Similar consequences were observed after the 2008 financial crisis (OECD, 2021). Difficulties accessing food and other essential goods were a direct effect of constrained imports, while reduced income from major sectors such as tourism and fishing deflated the broader economic systems of many countries (UN-Habitat, 2024).

Tourism comprises more than a fifth of GDP for two thirds of SIDS (OECD, 2018), and over 40 per cent of that of countries like Antigua and Barbuda, Saint Lucia, Cabo Verde, the Maldives, and Fiji (OECD, 2021). Fisheries represents on average 3 per cent of GDP in SIDS but is a critical source of employment and nutrition (OECD, 2020). Their ocean resources measure on average 2,000 times the size of SIDS' land masses (OECD, 2016) and, together, they host 30 per cent of the world's Special Economic Zones: exclusive sea/ocean areas subject to special tax, labour and business conduct privileges (SIDS Global Business Network, n.d.). The drop in demand for certain types of fish brought about by the pandemic resulted in a rise in unemployment and a drop in critical fishing vessel licensing fees in SIDS (ESCAP, 2020a). Food consumption in island nations has over recent years generally shifted away from local products in favour of imports which can, as evidenced, be unreliable, but which also tend to be highly processed, contributing to growing health issues (FAO, 2020; Foley et al., 2022).

While their own economies remain less diversified and developed than they could be, SIDS rely to

**Figure 4. GDP per capita in SIDS (current USD), 2023.**




Source: World Bank, 2025e

a considerable degree on overseas transfers. Remittances accounted for some 60 per cent of external funding among ODA-eligible SIDS in 2021-22 and grew by on average 6 per cent annually between 2000 and 2022, displaying resilience to the pandemic (OECD, 2024). Despite this, emigration remains an important topic of political debate in SIDS. The phenomenon shrinks the important pool of skilled workers and leadership figures in island countries, according to some studies leaving their high-skilled workforces at half their pre-emigration size on average (de la Croix et al., 2014). Remittances, however, become more critical due to the difficulties that SIDS experience in mobilizing both public and private finance from domestic and external sources.

In the 21st century, foreign direct investment and other private finance flows to SIDS have exhibited high volatility, with negative figures in 2018 and 2020 (OECD, 2024). Meanwhile, significant debt burdens many SIDS governments, hindering their access to funds from capital markets for investment in larger-scale infrastructure and public services (Bishop et al., 2021). Over 40 per cent of SIDS are already in debt distress or are getting close (Bharadwaj, 2024).

These macroeconomic challenges have very real implications on the ground. Over a third of the population in the 22 SIDS for which data is available live in multi-dimensional poverty and vulnerability. The rate is lower than in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, but significantly higher than in low- and middle-income countries on average (Panwar et al., 2024). In Caribbean SIDS, marginalized groups are becoming increasingly socially, politically and economically disadvantaged, often placing them in negative development and resilience spirals (Mycoo et al., 2022). Poverty levels vary among African SIDS, but inequality is high across the board, with the poorest often facing highly restricted social mobility (UN-Habitat, 2025). In the Pacific, one in four people live below the national poverty line (UN-Habitat, 2020a).

At the same time, high birth rates and rapid population growth are placing pressure on SIDS' natural and spatial resources as well as infrastructure, housing, jobs, and public services (Allam, 2022). Their large young populations are suffering from a lack of opportunities, with many seeking access to employment, social networks, and more modern lifestyles in cities, yet often encountering poverty and hardship (UN-Habitat, 2020a). In St Lucia, a third of adolescents do not participate in education, employment, or training programmes, with 72 per cent of poor adolescents living in urban areas (UNDP et al., 2020b). African SIDS too experience a youth bulge: almost 40 per cent of the population in Guinea-Bissau, São Tomé and Príncipe and Comoros are under 15 years old (World Bank, 2024). With limited access to education and jobs, a criminal pathway is increasingly likely for this cohort, exacerbating already significant security issues (UN-Habitat, 2025).

The informal sector provides incomes for many poor households in SIDS, accounting, for example, for over 50 percent of total employment in Samoa, Kiribati and the Dominican Republic, and 89 and 95 per cent respectively in Comoros and Guinea-Bissau (ILO, 2025). The informal sector is critical for productivity, livelihoods, and service provision, but poses issues to workers in the form of limited formal social protection, and to governments in the form of lost tax revenues. In urban areas in the Pacific, most women are engaged in the informal sector, often as produce traders (UN-Habitat, 2020a).

Despite recent progress, gender inequalities permeate many SIDS societies, reflected in low political representation and decision-making involvement among women, relatively low and precarious female labour force participation (Hillbom et al., 2023), unequal access to natural resources including land, as well as markets, capital, training, and technologies (UN-Habitat, 2020b), and high rates of gender-based violence (UNFPA, 2024).

**Table 4. Multidimensional poverty index (MPI)[3] of SIDS, latest year available for each country.**

| | | Multi-dimensional Poverty Index (MPI = H*A) | Headcount ratio: Population in multidimensional poverty (H) | Intensity of deprivation among the poor (A) | Vulnerable to poverty (who experience 20-33.32% intensity of deprivations) | In severe poverty (severity 50% or higher) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Country** | **Year** | **Range 0 to 1** | **% Population** | **Average % of weighted deprivations** | **% Population** | **% Population** |
| Barbados | 2012 | 0.009 | 2.49 | 34.23 | 0.49 | 0.00 |
| Belize | 2015-2016 | 0.017 | 4.30 | 39.76 | 8.36 | 0.63 |
| Comoros | 2022 | 0.084 | 19.22 | 43.86 | 19.44 | 5.68 |
| Cuba | 2019 | 0.003 | 0.71 | 38.06 | 2.65 | 0.09 |
| Dominican Republic | 2019 | 0.009 | 2.27 | 38.76 | 4.79 | 0.24 |
| Fiji | 2021 | 0.006 | 1.51 | 38.10 | 7.39 | 0.21 |
| Guinea-Bissau | 2018-2019 | 0.341 | 64.40 | 52.91 | 19.96 | 35.88 |
| Guyana | 2019-2020 | 0.007 | 1.82 | 39.29 | 6.50 | 0.22 |
| Haiti | 2016-2017 | 0.200 | 41.27 | 48.36 | 21.85 | 18.53 |
| Jamaica | 2018 | 0.011 | 2.78 | 38.95 | 5.00 | 0.23 |
| Kiribati | 2018-2019 | 0.080 | 19.80 | 40.48 | 30.22 | 3.53 |
| Maldives | 2016-2017 | 0.003 | 0.77 | 34.38 | 4.84 | 0.00 |
| Papua New Guinea | 2016-2018 | 0.263 | 56.63 | 46.49 | 25.26 | 25.79 |
| Samoa | 2019-2020 | 0.025 | 6.29 | 39.12 | 12.85 | 0.49 |
| São Tomé and Príncipe | 2019 | 0.048 | 11.71 | 40.92 | 16.97 | 2.08 |
| Seychelles | 2019 | 0.003 | 0.87 | 34.23 | 0.41 | 0.03 |
| Suriname | 2018 | 0.011 | 2.85 | 39.36 | 4.02 | 0.40 |
| Timor-Leste | 2016 | 0.222 | 48.25 | 45.91 | 26.83 | 17.38 |
| Tonga | 2019 | 0.003 | 0.87 | 38.14 | 6.40 | 0.02 |
| Trinidad and Tobago | 2022 | 0.002 | 0.53 | 38.80 | 0.79 | 0.14 |
| Tuvalu | 2019-2020 | 0.008 | 2.11 | 38.24 | 12.19 | 0.00 |

Source: OPHI, 2025.

**3.** Note: MPI represents three dimensions of poverty: health (measured by nutrition and child mortality), education (measured by years of schooling and school attendance) and living standards (measured by cooking fuel, sanitation, drinking water, electricity, housing and assets).

## SIDS cities and human settlements [4]

Patterns of urbanization are fundamental to the development trajectories of SIDS. Like these countries themselves, their urbanization profiles are highly diverse, though exhibit certain common characteristics. Urban areas are growing in size and population in many of the island nations as citizens pursue economic and social opportunities in cities or seek refuge from the effects of climate change and other crises playing out in rural and remote areas (UN-Habitat, 2020b). Within this, Singapore and Nauru are considered 100 per cent urbanized, while other countries have just about a fifth of their population residing in cities (World Bank, 2025f). In many SIDS, populations are concentrated in their largest (often capital) city, but smaller, secondary cities are also on the rise in some countries (de Paula & Hosein, 2024).

The urban population portions of African SIDS vary from a low of about 30 per cent in the Comoros to almost 76 per cent in São Tomé and Príncipe (World Bank, 2025f). Urbanization also takes different forms in this island region, with São Tomé and Príncipe displaying relatively low population concentration, while Comoros has the highest density of population in urban cores worldwide: 15,246 people per $m^2$ in Moroni (Combes et al., 2023). In the Caribbean, built-up urban areas grew by 40 per cent from 1975 to 2015 (de Paula & Hosein, 2024) and by 2050, 82 per cent of the population is projected to live in such areas (UN, 2018). 59 per cent of the urban population in Caribbean SIDS, importantly, are settled in cities with fewer than 300,000 inhabitants (UN, 2018) and in many countries, secondary cities are growing faster than major, established ones (McHardy and Donovan, 2016).

Pacific countries, in turn, are on average about 30 per cent urbanized: a figure which, however, hides significant diversity and which is considerably downward-skewed (by about 20 percentage points (UN-Habitat, 2020a)) by Papua New Guinea's very low urbanization rate and overall population size, which accounts for approximately 75 per cent of the Pacific SIDS total (Pacific Urban Partnership, 2023a). 13 Pacific SIDS are estimated to have more than 55 per cent of their populations resident in urban areas (World Bank, 2025f). Still, population growth in communities just outside official urban jurisdictional boundaries may not be accounted for in such official figures (UN-Habitat, 2020b). It is expected that at least half the region's population growth from 2020 to 2050 will occur in urban areas: a development set to about double their number of residents (Pacific Urban Partnership, 2023b).

Cities are responsible for a disproportionate share of GDP globally and so also in SIDS. They concentrate not only people, housing, and infrastructure but also salary-based employment and commercial activity, public services and offices, and working age populations. Cities serve as hubs for connection within and between countries, supporting not only immediate urban areas and communities but constituting cogs of wider national and regional economic growth and development (de Paula & Hosein, 2024). In the Pacific, for example, while urban areas account for some 30 per cent of the population, they are responsible for more than 50 per cent of GDP (Pacific Urban Partnership, 2023b). At the same time, urbanization trends in SIDS have not always been followed by the same (formal) GDP growth as is observed globally (UN-Habitat, 2015). Part of the explanation lies in island urbanization taking less sustainable pathways.

Much of the urban growth occurring in SIDS is poorly planned and regulated, causing a number of issues. Uncontrolled urban sprawl often leads to inefficient patterns of settlement, service delivery, infrastructure development and mobility, while also increasing the risk of environmental degradation, poverty, crime and social unrest (de Paula & Hosein, 2024; Pacific Urban Partnership, 2023b). In SIDS, growth of suburbs and peri-urban areas is partly a result of scarcity of liveable land, significantly driving up the cost of land and housing in urban centres and pushing poorer households to settle in less sought-after areas (de Paula & Hosein, 2024; UN-Habitat, 2020b; UN-Habitat, 2025). Oftentimes, this results in the formation of informal settlements in risk-prone zones.

In the Pacific, informal and squatter settlement growth exceeds overall urban growth in some countries: in Fiji, 80 per cent of new housing is being built in such settlements (Jones, 2012), and in the capitals of both the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea, over half of buildings are estimated to be informal (Pacific Urban Partnership, 2023b). And struggles over access to land in the Pacific are only intensifying with increasing urbanization, infrastructure and economic development, and shrinking of viable land areas by the impacts of climate change, all unassisted by complex and cumbersome tenure systems (UN-Habitat, 2020a).

By definition, informal settlements have limited access to basic urban services. In Caribbean SIDS, official data fails to account for gaps in basic service access: many households, especially in informal settlements, rely on privately funded and poorly constructed sanitation solutions in the absence of centralized wastewater management (UN-Habitat, 2024). Similarly, 93 per cent of the Pacific urban population officially enjoys access to improved drinking water (WHO, 2016), but this statistic does not include informal settlements. Solid waste management services in urban areas of the Pacific also collect only a fraction of the waste generated and frequently overlook informal areas, resulting in open and illegal dumpsites which are sources of environmental and health hazards.

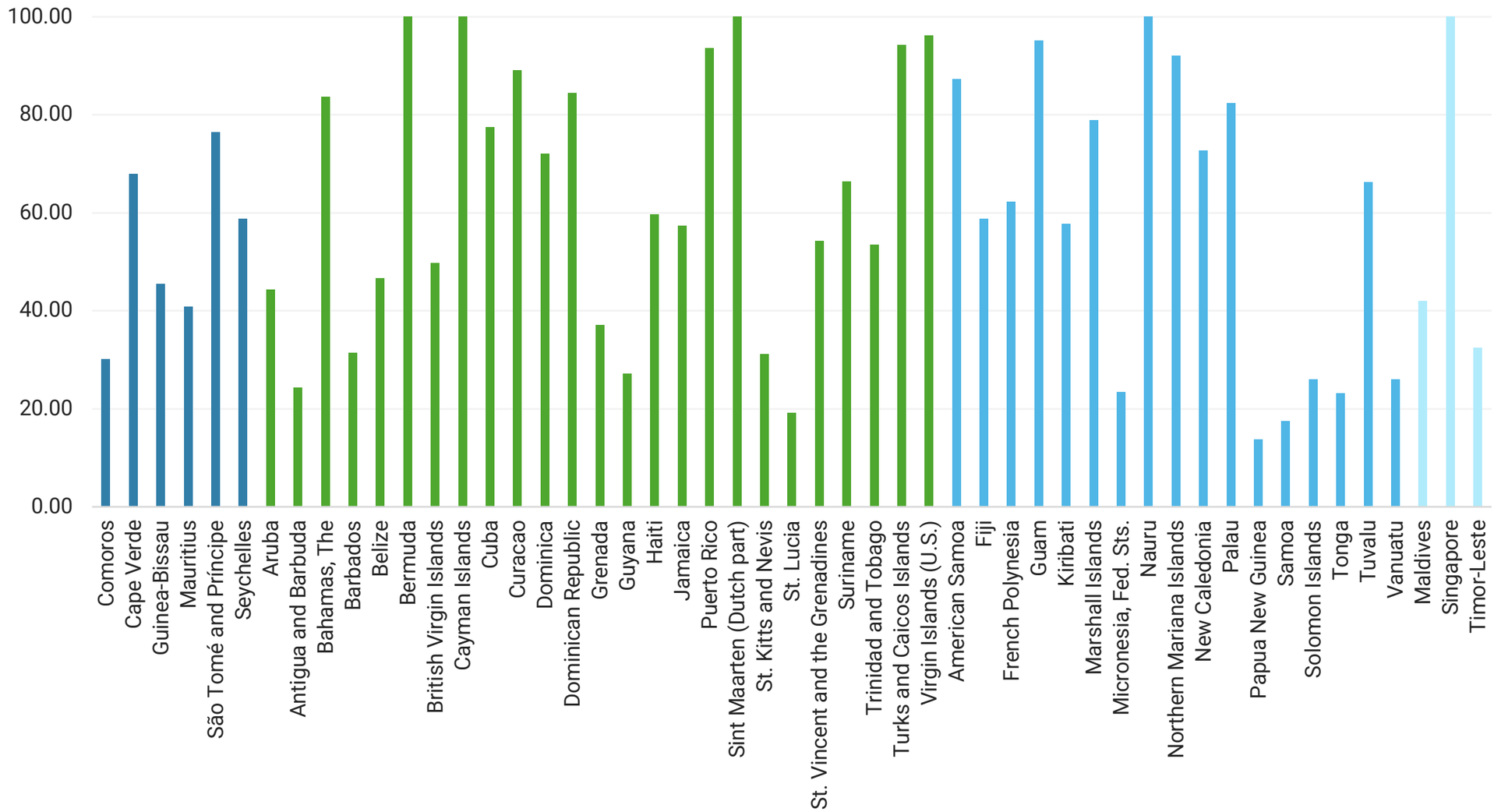
Poorly managed high population densities and inadequate housing contribute further to the vulnerability of urban, and especially informal urban, settlers in SIDS. Overcrowding in dwellings is tied to numerous health and safety issues, including stress and anxiety, increased risk of domestic violence, and faster spread of infectious diseases. Their lack of access to basic services and inadequate and crowded housing conditions, in combination with the marginalization, precarity and pre-existing health conditions of their populations, made informal settlements hotspots for both the health and socioeconomic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, and make them exceedingly vulnerable to the effects of climate change (UN-Habitat, 2020a).

Urban areas of SIDS are broadly vulnerable to climate change impacts. Being usually coastal, urban areas concentrate populations, assets, and commercial activity in locations most clearly exposed to cyclones, storms, hurricanes, salinization, coastal flooding and erosion (UN-Habitat, 2015). They are simultaneously experiencing land subsidence (sinking) which exacerbates challenges associated with sea level rise. In two Caribbean cities, subsidence rates are close to 2.5 times as high as the rate of sea level rise – close to one cm per year (Wu et al., 2022). Amid these compounding issues, urban development that introduces more impervious surfaces and destroys protective ecosystems, such as mangroves and tree coverage on slopes, both increase the risk of floods and landslides, and decrease groundwater and aquifer recharge (UN-Habitat, 2025).

Research clearly evidences the link between urban expansion and coastal ecosystem loss in Caribbean islands, exemplified by the 19 per cent reduction in mangrove forest cover on one large island off the coast of Honduras from 1985 to 2015 (Tuholske et al., 2017), and the 48 per cent shrinking in coral reefs bordering the St Lucian town of Soufriere from 1995 to 2001 (Government of St Lucia, 2004). Formation of informal settlements in the urbanized Castries-Gros Islet corridor of St Lucia has also demonstrably damaged natural watersheds, downgrading their ability to protect the densely populated coast from flooding during the wet season (Mycoo et al., 2016). Such urban resilience and sustainability deficits are highly concerning in a context where cities are increasingly expected to provide climate change adaptation pathways for residents of rural and low-lying areas uprooted by a loss of livelihoods or habitats (UN-Habitat, 2023a).

**4.** Note: The term 'urban' in not widely used in all SIDS, partly because of often dynamic rural-urban linkages with blurred boundaries, or low population densities in certain areas. A broad definition is used here, encompassing larger cities as well as smaller towns and built areas.

**Figure 5. Urban population (per cent of total population) of SIDS, 2023.**




Source: World Bank, 2025f

# Learning from crisis response and recovery: Building green, resilient, and pro-poor SIDS

03

## Core measures: Health, social protection, and economic recovery

**Health emergency response**

Though the economic response to the COVID-19 pandemic was arguably more central in SIDS than the health response, all countries took measures to curb the virus. In many ways, the decision to put 'health first', in alignment with United Nations (UN) frameworks for the pandemic response (UN, 2020a), also necessitated downstream economic and social measures. The most immediate action of many SIDS was closing borders to travellers and imposing internal movement controls. All Pacific and most Caribbean SIDS were effectively closed off by April 2020. Stay-at-home orders are believed to have been particularly effective in Caribbean SIDS as a result of their populations being accustomed to similar practice in relation to extreme weather events and so exhibiting psychological readiness and willingness to comply (Hambleton et al., 2020). Cases were frequently recorded as border closures were eased in later stages of the pandemic, but the initial shut-off had by then facilitated better preparedness (Campbell & Connell, 2021). Nonetheless, exposure to the virus revealed weaknesses in the health systems in many SIDS. The UN noted early in the pandemic that health system collapse posed one of the greatest threats of escalating morbidity and mortality, from COVID-19 as from other, otherwise treatable, conditions (UN, 2020a). This dynamic was evident in many SIDS.

With some exceptions, public health investments over the past decade have been low among SIDS. While Cuba has developed global repute for its strong healthcare workforce and capabilities and, besides developing its own COVID-19 vaccine, also dispatched medical professionals to assist other countries during the pandemic (Burki, 2021), on average among SIDS with data available, domestic general government expenditure on health has reached about 4 per cent of GDP between 2010 and 2021. This average hides figures under 1 per cent in Comoros, Guinea-Bissau and Haiti, and is significantly lower than the almost 8 per cent of high-income countries (WHO, 2024).

**Figure 6. The community of Maisi, Cuba, wearing masks.**

Source: Hector Bayona / UN-Habitat.

This shortfall was clearly exposed during the pandemic, manifesting in a lack of access to PPE, limited testing and intensive care unit facilities, and difficulties conducting contact tracing and health information campaigns. Already stretched healthcare workforces were challenged in the response. Under normal circumstances, many SIDS, especially in the Pacific, rely to a significant extent on overseas referrals and evacuations for treatment. Border closures and travel disruptions made such solutions nigh impossible. In Kiribati, for example, the grounding of flights put the transfer of both patients, workforce, equipment and medicine to a halt, leaving the healthcare system acutely short on capacity and stocks. This impacted patients with wide-ranging conditions, from common cardiovascular and infectious diseases to cancer (Campbell & Connell, 2021). Also in African and Caribbean SIDS, stretched healthcare infrastructure and resources challenged timely treatment of COVID-19 cases but also of other non-communicable and vector-borne disease patients (UN-Habitat, 2024; UN-Habitat, 2025).

In some cases, like that of Kiribati, a turn to traditional remedies helped to relieve some of the pressure on official healthcare systems. So-called local retreats and detox programmes became an alternative for citizens seeking care for non-communicable diseases, joint pain, fatigue and inflammation, and certain local plants were used in place of imported medicinal ingredients. However, these measures, especially the retreats and detox programmes, were largely restricted to more well-off citizens with private savings to spend on health (Marazita, 2021).

The ability of the pandemic – even as the virus itself did not grip SIDS in the way it did other countries – to stretch healthcare systems and severely limit access to general care, makes clear the urgent need for investment in the sector. This observation was central at the fourth International Conference on SIDS, where participants stressed the need to strengthen health systems by generally increasing financing and capacity, enhancing health literacy, and promoting equitable access to affordable and high-quality healthcare with a particular focus on health emergencies and non-communicable diseases (UN GA, 2024).

Shortfalls in health literacy and equitable access to health information and care were evident during the pandemic. In the Caribbean, though information

**Figure 7. Youth in Vuniivi settlement, Fiji, painting for COVID-19 awareness.**


Source: Katherine Drakeford / UN-Habitat

## Box 2: Case study – COVID-19 Community Awareness and Preparedness in Informal Settlements (CAPIS), Fiji: Empowering youth and local champions to enhance health equity

Based on results from a household survey and focus group discussions conducted in 14 informal settlements in Fiji at the onset of the pandemic, the country's Ministry of Housing and Community Development in partnership with UN-Habitat rolled out an awareness raising campaign and provided hygiene materials and food items to households across 70 communities. Before the three-month initiative, many of the households were unsure how best to behave to protect themselves from the virus in the 'new normal', or lacked the resources to follow guidelines.

To make sure the vital messaging reached everyone in the densely populated settlements, the CAPIS initiative engaged local Champions to act as focal points between communities and authorities. Youth groups and local artists were also involved to communicate about the pandemic through murals, spreading the word in creative ways while also meaningfully engaging a cohort experiencing high unemployment. Complementing this was distribution of official guidelines developed in consultation with the Ministry of Health and WHO, and delivery of trainings by local government health inspectors.

CAPIS served to reduce inequalities in access to health information and materials by targeting vulnerable and marginalized informal settlements. Doing so working with local groups as well as relevant authorities to leverage both community knowledge and connections, and technical expertise and public resources, it provided a scalable model for more inclusive post-pandemic health systems.

70 community awareness raising campaigns delivered in informal settlements, and community focal points appointed

about COVID-19 was actively circulated, reaching all households in larger settlements proved challenging (UN-Habitat, 2024). Surveys carried out in Fiji and the Solomon Islands in 2020 also showed limited awareness among informal settlement residents of the variety of clinical symptoms of COVID-19 (UN-Habitat, 2020c; 2020c). The Fijian government responded to this with innovative awareness raising campaigns for informal settlements, working closely with young people and appointing community focal points: see Box 2 (UN-Habitat, 2020a). Moving forward, inclusive digitalization and the people-centred smart cities agenda will be central in furthering information equality in SIDS.

Specialist care and hospitals in SIDS tend to be limited to urban areas (Campbell & Connell, 2021). While respondents to household surveys in Fiji and the Solomon Islands did not struggle significantly with healthcare access, reported distances to the closest healthcare facility differed significantly between municipalities. Women also reported accessing healthcare as more challenging than men, with a lack of money and transport being their most common barriers. Transportation was highly cited as an issue across the board (UN-Habitat 2020b; 2020c). Though cities like Suva in Fiji took steps to improve public transport safety and accessibility during the pandemic, including by providing basic safety kits at main stations (UN-Habitat, 2020a), investments in equitable transport remain high priority.

Socio-economic inequalities, then, need to be urgently addressed to effectively prevent public health crises and advance health outcomes in SIDS. Marginalized communities are more likely to suffer from a range of conditions which make them vulnerable to health system breakdown and new disease threats. On top of this, the rural and urban poor have greater difficulty accessing healthcare for disease prevention, diagnosis, and treatment (UN-Habitat, 2021a). The pandemic exposed these inequities, but they remain a concern for longer-term recovery and development, which needs to promote universal healthcare coverage.

**Employment, social protection and food security**

Measures to protect the incomes of those seeing their livelihoods lost or curtailed by the COVID-19 pandemic were essential for the continued functioning of households, businesses, and broader economies, especially in SIDS where hits to employment and commerce in many ways exceeded the direct impacts of the virus. Many SIDS governments took rapid steps to support citizens' livelihoods and the continuity of enterprise, including introducing cash transfer programmes, unemployment assistance, loans, and tax privileges. In the Pacific, Tonga, Vanuatu, and Samoa announced moratoria on loan repayments for businesses, while Fiji provided unemployment assistance and tax and tariff cuts (UN-Habitat, 2020a) while also expanding an existing cash for tree-planting initiative (Campbell & Connell, 2021) and handing out free seeds and planting materials to farmers (FAO, 2020). In the Caribbean, Antigua and Barbuda also distributed land and seedlings to farmers, while St Lucia introduced zero-interest working capital loans for micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) and leveraged a pre-existing EbA programme for livelihood creation (UN-Habitat, 2024). While countries like Barbados released funds through unemployment insurance payouts, such schemes were not in place and able to kick in across most SIDS.

Generally, the island country group displayed a lack of capacity for wage relief and income support (Campbell & Connell, 2021). Antigua and Barbuda, for example, where unemployment reached 30 per cent, did not have an established unemployment benefit programme (UN-Habitat, 2024). Women partly or fully taken out of gainful employment due to school closures and care duties were rarely compensated or practically supported (UN-Habitat, 2020a; UN-Habitat, 2020c). Where national social protection measures existed, they generally did not extend to those engaged in the informal sector. In the Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, and the Solomon Islands, less than five per cent of the poorest population segment was covered by social assistance just prior to COVID-19 (ESCAP, 2020b). Similarly, a household survey in informal settlements of Honiara, Solomon Islands found 69 per cent of residents in receipt of no government financial relief for COVID-19-related income loss (UN-Habitat 2020c), while in Viti Levu, Fiji, 60 per cent had not received any form of support from government, non-governmental organizations or others (UN-Habitat, 2020c).



Such sparse social safety nets for the informal sector are dissonant with a growing recognition among SIDS governments at different levels of the sector's importance for local and national economies, as for cultural vibrancy and social cohesion. The sector offers job opportunities for many urban residents, including those without formal qualifications, and it strengthens rural-urban links through trade and circular migration (UN-Habitat, 2020b; Pacific Urban Partnership, 2023a). Experimentation with adjustments to social protection policies and programmes in response to the pandemic offers opportunities for learning and innovation which can inform longer-term reforms to increase social security coverage of those in the informal sector. In the post-pandemic era, increasing the productivity of the informal sector is also a recognized means of more dynamic economies (Pacific Urban Partnership, 2023a).

In the relative absence of official social protection measures, populations in many SIDS took to community-, faith- and kinship-based solutions to income generation, service provision, and personal and food security. Households in many informal settlements received essential items from rural relatives, while millions of islanders continued to rely on remittances which, contrary to initial fears, did not dwindle throughout the pandemic (Le Dé & Jackson-Becerra, 2021). A large number of urban residents relocated to 'home' rural areas and outer islands for more subsistence-based and traditional livelihoods, sometimes reviving old methods of food production, preservation, and storage.

Still others took to or intensified existing practices of urban agriculture, in several cases assisted by government initiatives providing agricultural inputs, training and incentives (Campbell & Connell, 2021; UN-Habitat, 2020a; FAO, 2020). In Honiara, Solomon Islands, 58 per cent of survey respondents in informal settlements reported having increased farming or fishing activity in response to the impacts COVID-19 (UN-Habitat, 2020d), while a third of the population in the city is estimated to have left temporarily during the pandemic (World Bank, 2020a). In St Lucia, the prior establishment of food gardens in 80 per cent of primary schools proved fruitful in ensuring food security during the pandemic (UN-Habitat, 2024).

This turn to local food production across SIDS offers important learnings for the post-pandemic future. Besides serving as a critical social safety

**Figure 8. Women selling produce in downtown Port-au-Prince, Haiti.**

Source: Julius Mwelu / UN-Habitat

and food security net, it may have enhanced the diet of many households compared to import-dominated processed foods. At the same time, some issues emerged due to increased natural resource competition, a lack of skills in agricultural production among urban and young populations, and pressure on fragile island environments (Campbell & Connell, 2021; UN-Habitat, 2020a). How to capitalize on the benefits of urban agriculture and increased local food production while avoiding social tensions and environmental degradation is an important policy discussion for SIDS going forward. The youth bulge in many SIDS presents an opportunity to engage creative young people in such resilience, sustainability, inclusion, and innovation efforts in ways that also support vital learning, activation, and leadership experiences for the new generation.

**Economic cushioning and recovery**

The macroeconomic response to COVID-19 was critical for SIDS, sustaining societies during the crisis while also presenting opportunities for structural transformation into the future. Stimulus programmes allowed governments to facilitate development in core sectors while also encouraging diversification and the growth of local economies, and 'induced' digitalization offered opportunities to increase efficiency and effectiveness for the public and private sectors alike. Investment in ocean-based sectors – already the natural backbone of SIDS' economies – was quickly noted by SIDS governments and international finance providers as a key means for SIDS to come out of the pandemic with stronger economies, societies, and natural environments alike (OECD, 2021; UN GA, 2024). Promises of the blue economy – like the green – include improved human well-being and social equity, but also reduced environmental risks and ecological damage (UN-Habitat, 2015). Their unique biodiversity and natural resources present not only challenges but also immense development potential for island states, including through tourism and fishing (UN-Habitat, 2025) but also marine manufacturing, construction, biotechnology, education, shipping, and renewable energy (e.g., offshore wind, tidal and wave energy) (OECD, 2021).

Assessments to ascertain the trade and investment potential across value chains have

**Figure 9. Man pointing to the ocean at Honiara, Solomon Islands.**

Source: Bernhard Barth / UN-Habitat

## Box 3: Case study: Participatory Slum-Upgrading Programme in Cabo Verde: Community-led investment in social protection and employment support

The Participatory Slum-Upgrading Programme (PSUP) – a global UN-Habitat flagship initiative implemented in more than 30 countries – focuses on the biggest challenges of slums: a lack of adequate housing, access to safe water and sanitation, land tenure security, and secure livelihoods. Upgrades are carried out in close collaboration with slum communities as with governments, financial partners, and other urban stakeholders, to ensure that local priorities are heard and acted upon.

In Cabo Verde, roll-out of the PSUP aimed to reduce intra-urban inequalities across housing, basic urban services, and livelihoods, in the cities of Praia, Sai and Santiago. In the vulnerable community of Água Funda in the capital, Praia, community consultations to identify needs and priorities brought out calls for enhanced communal facilities to support childcare services for working mothers as well as an auditorium for employment-oriented training sessions. A multi-purpose community centre was the outcome of the participatory action planning exercise, demonstrating the value placed by this informal settlement community on social protection and livelihood support mechanisms.

**68%** population of Cabo Verde that lives in cities.

**1/3** portion of the total population resident in the capital, Praia

been encouraged to identify competitive niches that may allow SIDS to grow and diversity in the pandemic recovery (UN GA, 2024). Diversification would look different across the island nations, with agriculture, aquaculture and fishing for domestic consumption and export relevant for those heavily reliant on food imports (UN-Habitat, 2025; UN-Habitat, 2024). Investment in foundational infrastructure and services such as energy, telecom and financial services also have strong potential to drive development and growth in many countries.

In all cases, economic recovery and diversification in SIDS need to advance climate change resilience, sustainability, and social inclusion, given the group's heightened susceptibility to the adverse effects of climate change – and the intensified vulnerability of disadvantaged communities and households. The size of the tourism sector makes resilience building and greening especially critical here, with relevant measures spanning climate-proofing tourism infrastructure, introducing locally anchored and small-scale ecotourism, diversifying products and markets, and investing in low-emissions transport, among others. Critically, efforts to reinvigorate tourism need to incorporate equity considerations to ensure that benefits are shared with the most marginalized (Foley et al., 2022; UN-Habitat, 2025). Agroforestry and sea-fishing, as other important investment opportunities for several SIDS, need to be regulated by robust sustainability standards. Economic recovery packages targeting infrastructure such as roads and ports, waste treatment systems, energy grids and power plants must also to be built sustainably, to save energy, reduce emissions and set societies on low-carbon development trajectories (UN-Habitat, 2021a).

In urban areas, promising economic recovery areas with environmental and social co-benefits include retrofitting, green and resilient buildings, waste collection and management, decentralized renewable urban energy, local food systems, and climate resilient urban infrastructure (UN, 2020b), many of which were priorities for the government of for example Antigua and Barbuda in the COVID-19 recovery (UN-Habitat, 2024). Support for local economies and innovation is critical for SIDS' shared prosperity and sustainability, especially in settlements with a lack of economic opportunities (UN-Habitat, 2020a; UN-Habitat, 2025). The first step to achieving this is recognition of the value of local and informal economies, which is already demonstrated by many SIDS governments and stakeholders.

At the 6th Pacific Urban Forum of 2023, participants identified the informal economy as important for the region on several dimensions, and stressed a need for research on how the informal sector can be better supported alongside the formal economy. Local economic planning supported by capacity building for local governments, and tailored, participatory processes to identify context specific economic opportunities, have proven fruitful measures in the Pacific in the past (Pacific Urban Partnership, 2023a). For example, local governments can lead the participatory development of sustainable economic development strategies, reflecting relevant local knowledge and citizen priorities (UN, 2020b).

Key to fuelling local economic growth is also connectivity and access to technology for local businesses and communities (UN-Habitat, 2024). A lack of affordable, high-speed internet penetration proved a barrier to business continuity in SIDS during the pandemic, especially for smaller operators. It was also an issue for many governments: for example, less than a tenth of the governments of Caribbean SIDS had their paperwork digitized, and only half had cybersecurity strategies and digital agendas in place, at the onset of the crisis (Ziegler et al., 2020). Spatial, generational, and socio-economic inequalities in the ability to access services and knowledge online exacerbated the unevenness of the pandemic impact (UN-Habitat, 2021a). Digitalization and the introduction of new technology solutions, however, were among the first measures taken by many SIDS governments and businesses, sometimes for lack of choice.

In Fiji, the national authorities were behind digitally supported social distancing measures, while retailers introduced new apps for online shopping and payment, and telecom providers offered special deals on data and communication to expand connectivity (UN-Habitat, 2021b). The Solomon Islands, meanwhile, leveraged vertical and cross-sectoral partnerships as its new Livelihood Sector Committee – comprising public, private and community stakeholders – collaborated with a mobile phone provider to disseminate gardening instructions to food insecure households (FAO, 2020). In the Caribbean, private sector players in Trinidad and Tobago and Granada quickly scaled up online ordering systems, while a region-wide drive to increase access to financial services has gone hand in hand with efforts to advance connectivity (Clarke, 2021).

Continued progress toward accessible, affordable, and reliable mobile data, broadband and technologies, as well as the digitalization of government systems, remain high priority to support continuous work, trade, and learning. Digital services, connectivity, and data analytics are also critical for increasing resilience to climate change, with software, internet speed, and data availability important for effective risk mapping (UN-Habitat, 2025). Getting there requires supportive policies and legislation, relevant skills, and resilient infrastructure, with the steps taken during the pandemic able to serve as a springboard (FAO, 2020).

## Building resilient and inclusive cities and human settlements

### Adequate housing for all

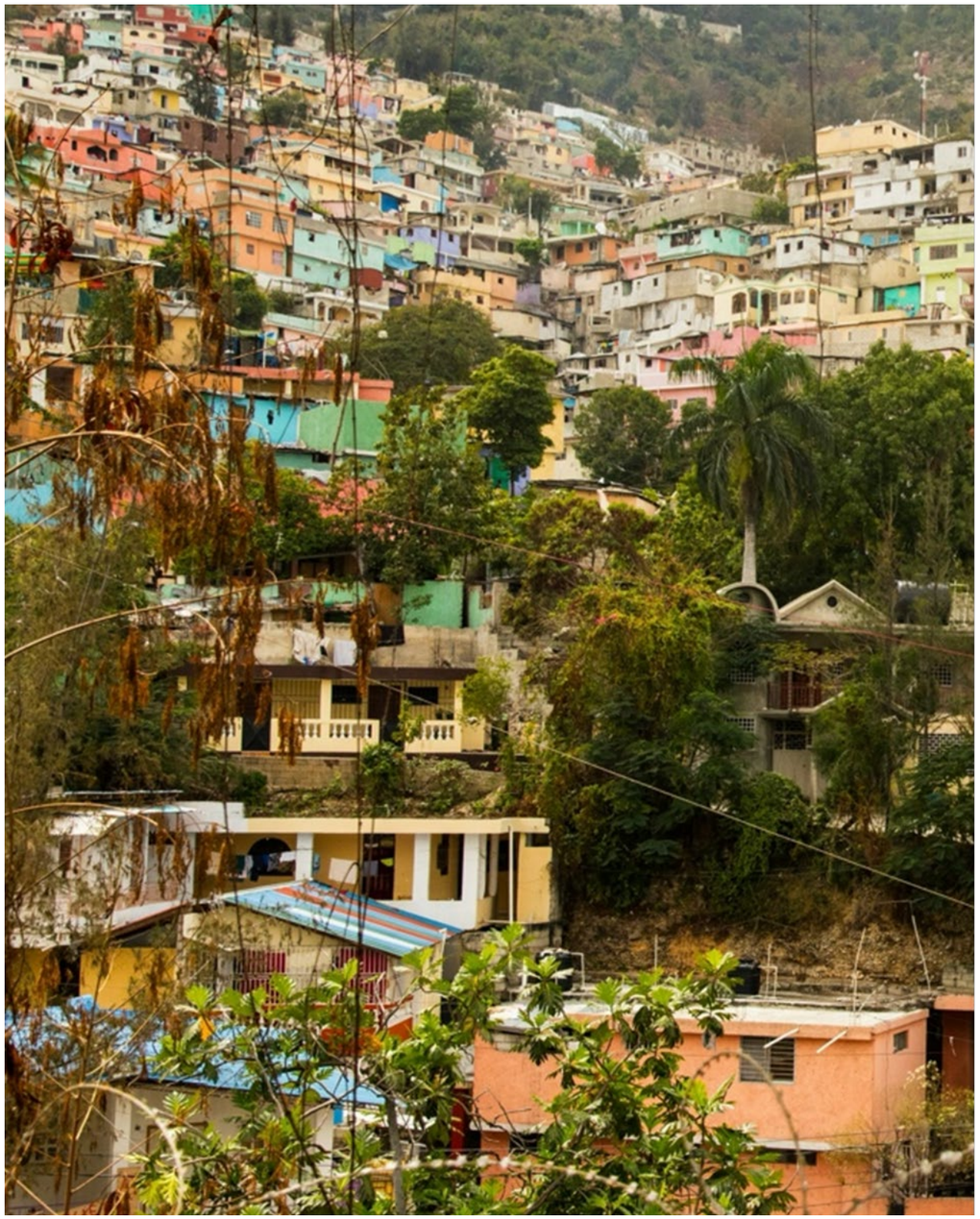
Poor and informal urban environments tend to display housing conditions conducive of the spread of infectious diseases: over-crowding, poor insulation and ventilation, sensitivity to extreme weather events, and a lack of secure tenure – the latter two placing residents at high risk of displacement. Pandemic-related physical distancing measures were difficult to apply in many of these areas, and the stress placed on households residing in such inadequate conditions during movement restrictions sometimes led to an increase in domestic violence (UN-Habitat, 2020a; UN, 2020b). In Fiji, for example, calls to the national domestic violence hotline spiked in April of 2020, many of which were attributed to pandemic-related stay-at-home orders (UN-Habitat, 2020a). The fall in income experienced by many poor SIDS households during COVID-19 also challenged their ability to pay rent and mortgage instalments, in turn increasing the risk of eviction at a time when staying home could be a matter of life and death. More than a fifth of informal settlement residents surveyed in Fiji in 2020 felt at risk of being evicted in the near future (76 per cent of whom were female) and 7 per cent had been threatened with eviction in the past month (UN-Habitat, 2020c).

In some cases, SIDS government investments in improved housing and public buildings and infrastructure were paused in response to the pandemic (Thomas et al., 2020). In the recovery period, however, efforts have been renewed and progress made in several countries. The Economic Recovery Strategy of the Government of Antigua and Barbuda incorporated the sale of crown land to increase affordable settlement options and the introduction of a one-year investment incentive for home renovation and construction (UNDP et al., 2020a). More long-term, the country's Adaptation Plan for the Infrastructure and Housing Sector provides a framework for a ten-year investment commitment to strengthen the resilience of infrastructure and housing (UN-Habitat, 2024).

In Comoros, UN-Habitat from 2022 to 2023 supported the National Government to develop a National Urban Planning and Housing Policy and recommendations for improved land management to enhance tenure security and climate resilience (UN-Habitat, 2025). Other SIDS have initiated slum improvement projects, including St Lucia where the Government requested support from UN-Habitat to develop an island-wide resilient informal settlements upgrading and prevention strategy (UN-Habitat, 2024), and Fiji and the Solomon Islands where squatter and informal settlement upgrading projects have been undertaken (UN-Habitat, 2020a). Such efforts need to be scaled to ensure that poor urban SIDS residents are resilient in the face of future shocks such as new health crises and climate change-related extreme events.

Broader investments in affordable and adequate housing to support the financial, physical, and mental health of SIDS populations also need to be stepped up. Learnings from the pandemic can be harnessed in updating building standards and practices, including to ensure adequate ventilation, sanitation, and personal space. As policy-changes are introduced, there is an opportunity to bolster the sustainability and climate resilience of housing and buildings by ensuring energy efficiency, structural building integrity and the use of NbS for cooling and water management (UN-Habitat, 2021a).

Figure 10. Informal settlement in Port-au-Prince, Haiti.



Source: Alberto Hektor / Adobe Stock

Housing improvement programmes are most effective with the participation of the households and communities affected by them. Experiences from the Caribbean, for example, indicate that residents of informal settlements prioritize physical infrastructure upgrades over the achievement of full legal title, suggesting primary attention to physical structures and consideration of a continuum of tenure solutions can make interventions more rewarding for communities (UN-Habitat, 2020e). In the Pacific, Indigenous people are disproportionately affected by the lack of adequate housing, while traditional approaches to housing design, construction and tenure management present opportunities to improve climate resilience and sustainable interfaces with nature (Habitat for Humanity Fiji et al., 2019; Riyaz et al., 2023). An effective response to the ongoing housing crisis takes the meaningful involvement of governments at different levels, communities, civil society, and the private sector.

**Basic urban services**

During previous pandemics, such as the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, lack of access to water and sanitation was a key factor driving differentiated impacts among countries and communities. The COVID-19 pandemic too exposed major weaknesses and inequalities in basic urban services such as water, sanitation and transport (UN-Habitat, 2021a). Unreliable water supply and a lack of solid waste and wastewater disposal systems made maintaining adequate personal hygiene a challenge in under-served communities. Disruptions in service delivery associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, such as reduced availability or increased cost of public transport, also created issues for those unable to work from home or to organize personal transport to work and services. The difficulty for public transport as well as healthcare and emergency vehicles to reach households in informal settlements dominated by narrow or steep passageways presented problems during the COVID-19 pandemic, but also increases the vulnerability of these settlements to climate shocks (UN-Habitat, 2020a). In Guinea-Bissau, only a third of the population had access to electricity, and 12 per cent had access to sanitation facilities, in 2020 (UN-Habitat, 2023b).

Governments and stakeholders in SIDS across the region have recognized and voiced the need for investment in basic services coming out of the pandemic. At the Pacific Urban Forum of 2023,

Figure 11. Solid waste in Príncipe, São Tomé and Príncipe.

Source: Laurie Servières / UN-Habitat.

participants were unison about the importance of assessing existing waste management policies and infrastructure across the region to identify investment gaps as well as good practices for scaling. They also agreed on the need for development of resilient transport infrastructure and policies for emissions reduction (Pacific Urban Partnership, 2023b). Most Pacific Island countries have ambitious renewable energy targets, acknowledging the region's wealth in resources such as hydropower, solar and wind, and that renewables present opportunities not only for energy security but also for climate change mitigation and green job creation (UN-Habitat, 2020a). At the fourth international conference on SIDS in 2024, SIDS governments globally called for sustainable and just energy transitions supported by investments in infrastructure, technology, policy, and training; the development of integrated water management systems; and enhanced regional connectivity through safe, sustainable, and affordable land, air and sea transport (UN GA, 2024).

Indeed, several SIDS governments targeted utilities such as water and energy in their pandemic economic recovery plans, and enhanced basic services have been the objective of many international development projects in the island regions (UN-Habitat, 2024). In Moroni, Comoros, a participatory urban planning process facilitated by UN-Habitat led to the implementation of a range of activities to enhance basic services, including water, sanitation, and waste management, between 2020 and 2024. Close collaboration with community organizations proved imperative for the success of this initiative, as it allowed the community's needs and priorities to be effectively integrated in outputs while also building local capacity to manage climate related and other risks going forward (UN-Habitat, 2025). Community-informed investments in basic services have strong potential to pay dividends for investors, and among them should be SIDS governments but also private sector partners and international donors.

**Integrated spatial planning and design**

Urban form and the ways that built urban environment interact with the natural environment, and cities with their rural surroundings, were important factors in how SIDS settlements handled COVID-19, with learnings for the post-pandemic period. Many urban residents relocated to outer islands and rural areas in response to the virus. Yet, contrary to popular belief, global research indicates that highly or densely populated cities were not in themselves culprits of COVID-19 infection and mortality rates (UN-Habitat, 2021a). Rather, strategically dense cities provided enabling environments for disease prevention and health promotion (UN-Habitat, 2020c; de Paula & Hosein, 2024). Broadly, well managed compactness and mixed-use planning can generate economies of agglomeration with efficient provision of goods, services and infrastructure and reduced car dependence, reducing emissions, surface sealing and urban sprawl liable to harm natural environments and human health, encroach on valuable agricultural land, and disrupt ecosystem services (UN-Habitat, 2014). They also have the potential to serve poorer populations through enhanced integration and access to economic opportunities and services in core settlements (UN-Habitat, 2015).

It is important, however, to distinguish well managed compactness from overcrowding, which has been linked to higher infection rates and mortality (UN-Habitat, 2021a). For SIDS with extremely dense urban cores and overcrowded informal settlements, context tailored urban planning and design have important roles to play in activating transformations toward more socially, economically and environmentally sustainable and resilient compactness. Here, introducing new NbS and strengthening green-blue networks can carry much potential to regulate urban environments for improved human and planetary health. Providing sufficient space for walking and cycling within these dense spaces can also improve both mental and physical public health, reduce emissions from car use, and make public transport less crowded (UN-Habitat, 2014).

Integrated, area-based approaches to response and longer-term recovery have key advantages in the context of complex shocks like the pandemic. They sanction an understanding of the multi-faceted needs of communities within their geographic and social contexts – and responses that incorporate and seek synergies from elements such as infrastructure and housing, livelihoods and commerce, and health, education, and basic services. Such integration and coordination can mitigate the potential silo effects and unintentional spill-over of sectoral approaches (UN-Habitat, 2020e; UN-Habitat, 2021b).



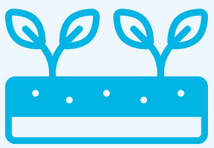
## Box 4: Case study: Building resilient, inclusive, and sustainable cities and human settlements in the Solomon Islands through National Housing Policy dialogue and Nature-based-Solutions

In the aftermath of the pandemic, a range of activities have by carried out in the Solomon Islands to make the country's cities and human settlements more green, inclusive, and resilient to future crises.

A shortage of affordable housing has been a critical issue in Solomon Islands cities for over a decade. The absence of a national land use policy and housing policy are among the factors behind imbalanced demand and supply, excessive costs, and the formation of informal settlements associated with health, security, and climate risks. To help advance a fit-for-purpose National Housing Policy, UN-Habitat helped to facilitate a multi-stakeholder workshop in 2023, resulting in the development of a draft National Housing Policy Framework.

In 2022, meanwhile, UN-Habitat worked closely with local communities, RMIT University, the Pacific Solomon Engineering and Consultancy Ltd, and the Kastom Gaden Association, to pilot NbS in informal settlements of the Solomon Islands. The project aimed to leverage nature to reduce disaster risk and improve local food security, and to create a proof of concept for similar urban poor communities in Pacific SIDS. Workshops, trainings, and participatory sessions were undertaken to build community awareness and skills and to design tailored solutions. On the recommendation of communities, an urban garden (146 $m^2$) and vetiver grass and bamboo planting (2,450 seedlings) for flood and landslide prevention were implemented, drawing on the local workforce and traditional ecological knowledge and practices.

Interventions in housing and settlement resilience which reduce immediate risks to communities while also creating better prospects for their sustainable development have high potential for replication and scaling within and beyond the Solomon Islands.



**146$m^2$** size of the pilot urban garden (locally, 'Sup Sup Garden') co-designed with the community at the Koa Hill Central Valley riverbank, Solomon Islands.

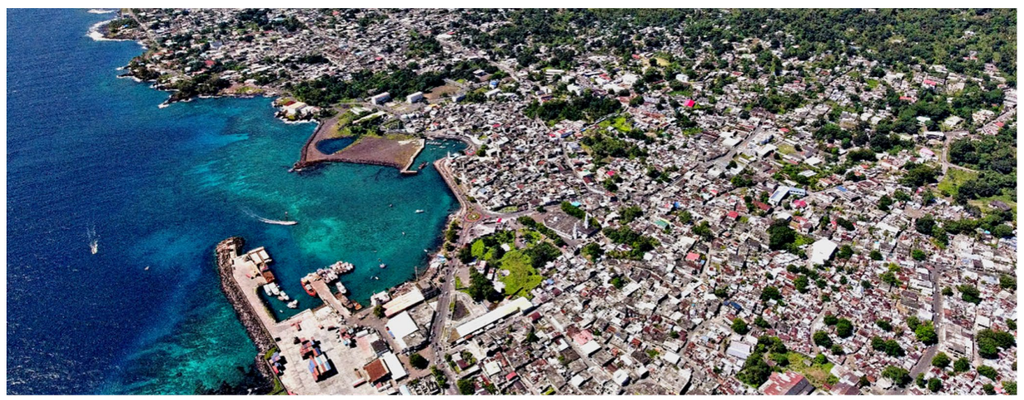
Territorial or cross-administrative area planning also emerges as advantageous in the context of the pandemic, which in SIDS saw novel cross-border flows (rural to urban relocation) and reinforced activity at the boundary (increased peri-urban food production). It became clear during the pandemic to what extent rural and urban areas rely on each other for goods, services, and knowledge. This insight adds momentum to the existing acknowledgement among SIDS governments of the benefits associated with addressing rural and urban development holistically (UN-Habitat, 2020b), providing an opportunity for strengthened considerations of the rural-urban nexus in post-pandemic planning and policymaking.

Territorial planning covering several urban centres further allows for recognition of the potential role of smaller cities in absorbing growth that may be more harmful in primary cities. In some countries, COVID-19 saw a redistribution of people and wealth from capitals to secondary and smaller cities and towns (UN-Habitat, 2021a). The Solomon Islands offer an example wherein the primary city is under increasing pressure while smaller cities and towns are struggling financially and socially, meaning such exact shifts can have multiple benefits. In this sense, trends catalyzed during the pandemic can provide patterns on which to model future strategies and plans.

With green and blue environments constituting major assets to SIDS, strategically managing the nexus between the built and natural environment becomes especially critical for the prosperity and sustainability of island settlements. Through EbA and NbS, natural environments and processes serve to alleviate the adverse effects of climate change, promote sustainability, and provide social and economic services. Indeed, EbA and NbS such as mangrove plantation and watershed management, are traditionally practiced in SIDS, and interest in expanding their use has grown in recent years (UN-Habitat, 2015). Since the pandemic, Pacific SIDS governments have collectively suggested that traditional and innovative NbS and EbA, supporting a ridge-to-reef approach, can be central tenets of a uniquely Pacific 'brand' of urban development (Pacific Urban Partnership, 2023b). The same measures are no less relevant for African and Caribbean SIDS (UN-Habitat, 2025; UN-Habitat, 2024).

The COVID-19 pandemic had its roots in unsustainable relationships between nature, animals, and human activity, and mitigating the emergence and spread of future infectious diseases must involve making healthier such relationships. Blue-green networks and landscape corridors can create safety buffers between humans and wildlife, while also advancing biodiversity and climate change mitigation and adaptation objectives (UN-Habitat, 2021a). Green urban spaces, meanwhile, were critical for maintaining community health and wellbeing during the pandemic by enabling exercise, keeping cities cool and reducing pollution, while simultaneously promoting urban biodiversity. Such solutions, and others that support the joint health of humans, animals, and the environment in the face of climate change and other crises, are smart investments in the SIDS context.

**Figure 12. Aerial view of Moroni, Comoros**



Source: UN-Habitat.

## From grassroots to global: Multilevel governance and finance

### Community participation

Meaningful community involvement in the response to and recovery from shocks and stresses such as COVID-19 and climate change-related disasters is both intrinsically and instrumentally valuable, and especially relevant in the SIDS context. While crises such as the pandemic offer opportunities to build back better, some past recovery processes have some past recovery processes have failed to adequately engage with local understandings and capacities, presenting a risk of furthering community vulnerability (Foley et al., 2022). Communities and local organizations are well placed to identify needs and appropriate solutions for local contexts and lived experiences. Ensuring they are included – from situational assessments to local implementation and monitoring, and national or regional scaling efforts – is also a matter of dignity and ownership, which tends to translate to amplified impact and sustainability of interventions. In SIDS, local communities have rich experiences of managing multi-faceted crises, and repeatedly demonstrate impressive ingenuity and capacity to draw on kinship networks, traditional knowledge and practices, and a mutually beneficial relationship with nature (Bishop et al., 2021).

The value of community participation has been clearly demonstrated in the pandemic response and recovery. In Papua New Guinea (PNG), for example, community-based organizations were able to deliver tailored awareness raising and protection initiatives by harnessing local knowledge to effectively navigate communities' rich diversity and compounding issues including gender-based violence and violence related to sorcery accusations. This contrasted with the initially more uniform government responses, following high-level international guidelines. When PNG governments recognized the value of community-based organizations, these were empowered to strengthen the link to communities, enhancing use of existing community structures

**Figure 13. Workshop with participation of people living in informal settlement in Honiara, Solomon Islands.**

Source: UN-Habitat.

and knowledge and more effectively addressing local needs (Thomas et al., 2021).

With data gaps presenting a challenge to informed policymaking in many SIDS, qualitative community consultation and participatory insights gathering become all the more critical to capture otherwise invisible trends and conditions (UN-Habitat, 2025; UN, 2020a). In Comoros, for example, information gathered through inclusive dialogue as part of a City Resilience Action Planning (CityRAP) initiative proved critical for informing policymaking and planning during and after the pandemic, including a study on urban vulnerabilities, a municipal guide on climate adaptation, and a review of the National Strategy for Disaster Risk Reduction (UN-Habitat, 2025).

The accelerating effects of climate change in SIDS make leaving no one behind in information dissemination and collection, and efforts at resilience building, even more urgent. Marginalized and vulnerable communities, including the poor, informal urban settlement residents and, within them, women, children, and people with disabilities, experience the adverse impacts of climate change most severely. At the same time, these groups are likely to be marginalized also in awareness raising, vulnerability assessment, and participatory planning and policy design initiatives. Mechanisms need to be put in place that promote open and inclusive dialogue and accountability for follow-through on communities' recommendations for adaptation and resilience building, and response to loss and damage (UN-Habitat, 2023a; UN-Habitat, 2025). This is especially critical in the case of planned community relocations, which are sometimes necessary, but which present high social risk (UN-Habitat, 2020a). Pacific stakeholders have also highlighted biodiversity conservation in and around urban areas as an objective which can't be effectively achieved without the participation of communities straddling urban fringes and relying on peri-urban ecosystems for livelihoods, energy, and WASH (Pacific Urban Partnership, 2023b).

Beyond including local communities and organizations in the design and implementation of specific policies and projects, broader efforts at local leadership skills development and organizational capacity strengthening can enable more proactive and comprehensive community advocacy and more efficient community-led crisis response (UN-Habitat, 2023a). Institutionalizing the meaningful inclusion of local stakeholders in national and local governance, emergency management, and longer-term recovery and development planning, has transformative potential for SIDS (UN-Habitat & CAF, 2024).

One promising avenue to making governance more inclusive of local stakeholders is harmonization of traditional and formal governance systems. This may involve systematically engaging traditional leaders in planning, service design and conflict resolution and identifying policy areas where traditional governance systems can take the lead, with peri-urban development on traditional land listed as a key example by Pacific experts. Centering cultural and traditional knowledge systems and governance models within sustainable development and resilience-building approaches is a priority articulated by the Pacific Urban Forum (Pacific Urban Partnership, 2023a) as well as the Framework for Resilient Development in the Pacific (Pacific Community et al., 2016).

**Role of local and national governments**

Cities and local and regional governments were at the frontlines of the pandemic response in SIDS, and they have an essential role to play in recovery and long-term development. Local governments are advantaged by their physical vicinity to households, their knowledge of the territory, and their position as intermediaries between national authorities and local actors (Moncada & Nguyen, 2024). This enables them variously to introduce more relevant disaster preparedness and resilience building measures, to position local needs in national policies, and to execute emergency plans, ensuring communities are informed and follow directives (FAO, 2020; Bishop et al., 2021). In Fiji, for example, the Suva City Council showed strong crisis leadership during the pandemic, collaborating vertically and horizontally to implement short- and long-term measures responding to different facets of the crisis: from health and safety information campaigns and new digital tools to public transport safety and SME support (UN-Habitat, 2021b).

At the same time, a lack of capacity and resources among SIDS local governments contributed to service disruptions during the pandemic, when access to reliable transport, energy and WASH was critical for public safety. The need for responsive and sufficiently resourced sub-national authorities and service providers, then, was clearly exposed by the pandemic, suggesting an opportunity to advance their empowerment in its wake (UN-Habitat, 2025; UN-Habitat, 2021a).

Appropriately paced and strategically managed fiscal and administrative decentralization are objectives reflected in the New Urban Agenda (NUA), while UN frameworks for the pandemic response and recovery highlight the critical role of national sub-national authorities, the need for collaboration between levels of governments, and the importance of increasing local governments' budgetary capacity (UN, 2020a; 2020b). Similar recognition is reflected among SIDS governments and stakeholders. For example, a formal Pacific NUA exists since 2015 which positions urbanization as a regional and national matter with implications for broad social and economic wellbeing (UN-Habitat, 2020b). Among African SIDS, efforts at strengthening multilevel governance are ongoing, with Comoros, for example, as part of cyclone recovery efforts from 2019 taking measures to improve the political, legal, and institutional framework for urban development at the national level and to strengthen local institutional capacities (UN-Habitat, 2025).

However, regional vision setting, and some policy and practice reform by national governments, remain needed to advance multilevel governance in SIDS. National governments can better support cities and local governments in crisis response and recovery by introducing and strengthening urban ministerial portfolios (Pacific Urban Partnership, 2023a) and national urban policies (UN-Habitat, 2020a). Such portfolios and policies can provide frameworks through which to engage and empower local governments and other local stakeholders and to set a shared vision for resilient and sustainable urban development. In the Pacific, some SIDS have in place or are developing national urban policies, but accelerated progress region-wide is called for to enhance urban inclusion, resilience and sustainability (UN-Habitat, 2020b).

**Figure 14. Voluntary local review workshop in Labasa, Fiji.**

Source: Samantha Poncabare / UN-Habitat.

With generally concerning trends in overseas development assistance and volatile foreign direct investment over the course of the pandemic and beyond, there is an ongoing critical need for SIDS to mobilize additional public domestic resources at the national and local levels (Meng et al., 2022). While many countries have achieved improved tax revenue to GDP ratios over recent years, the levels attained are inadequate to finance development and climate adaptation needs (ESCAP, 2022) and SIDS' savings rates remain low compared to those of other developing countries (UNDP & UN OHRLLS, 2015). The so-called 'scissor effect' – a phenomenon where cost pressures increased at the same time as revenues dwindled in association with the pandemic and its response – was a central contributor to the operational difficulties experienced by local governments throughout COVID-19.

Bolstered transfers with reduced conditionality from the national level are called for in some SIDS, while effort among local governments to grow their own-source revenue streams and improve local revenue management are easy wins (UN-Habitat, 2021a; 2021b). Not all countries permit cities to hold emergency funds or non-financial reserves, yet the pandemic clearly demonstrated the value of contingency provisions for local economic resilience. Creating enabling regulations for this purpose is essential for SIDS cities' future ability to withstand shocks of different kind (UN-Habitat, 2021b).

Finally, capacity building for broad disaster risk management is critical among both national and local SIDS governments. Given the island nations' pronounced vulnerability, knowledge of the impacts of climate change and their interlinkages with other ongoing or potential crises, as well as responsibility to affect solutions, need to stretch beyond dedicated ministries and agencies to be mainstreamed across government (Pacific Urban Partnership, 2023b). Action to bolster climate and crisis resilience calls for a comprehensive approach with involvement of a range of sectors and multi-level stakeholders, and coordination among them. In the Caribbean, national government investment in resilient urban development, especially informal settlement upgrading – and support for local governments to achieve this – is clearly needed in several SIDS (UN-Habitat, 2020e). While countries like Antigua and Barbuda does not have a sub-national government structure, capacity building for local authorities and the development of local development plans are important investments for inclusive urban resilience building in St Lucia (UN-Habitat, 2024).

**Role of intra-, inter-regional and international partnerships**

United by the shared characteristics which granted them their 'special case status', regional cooperation becomes an important lever for SIDS on the road to inclusive, resilient, and sustainable crisis response and recovery. SIDS have indeed demonstrated pioneering intra- and inter-regional policy dialogue, knowledge exchange, and joint global advocacy, notably in the areas of climate, ocean, and biodiversity action. In April 2020, the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) convened the Placencia Ambition Forum to maintain the grouping's climate dialogue during the pandemic and advocate for sustained and strengthened climate action in the face of – or leveraging – economic recovery measures (Rasheed, 2021).

As COVID-19 advanced, island countries collaborated on common policies for the smooth flow of medicines and other essential goods, and knowledge sharing on topics such as workers' safety and food security. In the Caribbean, the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) was used as an experience-sharing and problem-solving platform, among other things developing a regional COVID-19 agri-food risk management framework which informed national policies in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Grenada, Barbados, Bahamas, and Dominica (FAO, 2020). The Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency and the Caribbean Public Health Agency, meanwhile, coordinated information sharing, needs assessments and outbreak response logistics including border closures (Campbell & Connell, 2021; Hambleton et al., 2020), while the University of the West Indies led a regional research and testing network developed in response to earlier HIV and Zika virus outbreaks (Landis, 2021). ECLAC, in turn, supported assessment of the socioeconomic impact of the pandemic, provided continuous analysis and policy recommendations, and facilitated regional policy and practice dialogues (ECLAC, 2021).

In the Pacific, a subregional programme launched in 2011 to address fragmentation in water supply and sanitation solutions and mitigate infectious disease



## Box 5: Case study: Caribbean Strategy for Informal Settlement Upgrading: A Guide to Inclusive and Resilient Urbanization

Launched in February 2020 – just in time to inform the COVID-19 response and recovery across Caribbean SIDS – the Caribbean Strategy for Informal Settlements Upgrading (CSISU) offers a comprehensive framework to guide national policies, strategies, and programmes addressing informality. Developed under the UN-Habitat-led Participatory Slum Upgrading Programme (PSUP), in collaboration with the European Commission and the Africa-Caribbean-Pacific Secretariat, CSISU draws on international and regional best practices to support locally grounded approaches. It enables Caribbean governments to move from ad hoc interventions toward integrated, city-wide upgrading initiatives that improve living conditions in informal settlements. The strategy emphasizes knowledge sharing, capacity building, and learning from common challenges across the region to accelerate progress toward more inclusive and resilient urban development.

CSISU is anchored in integrated spatial planning and promotes upgrades to housing and basic urban services, aligning with a broader vision for sustainable urban transformation. Its typological analysis of informal settlements – spanning high-density urban hillsides, urban flats, and suburban hillsides – helps countries design tailored responses to the unique challenges and vulnerabilities of each setting. With nine strategic priorities at its core, the strategy advocates for community-based planning, secure tenure, investment in strategic infrastructure, and replication of effective relocation practices. In doing so, CSISU holds strong potential to help Caribbean SIDS adopt context-sensitive approaches to building resilience against health and climate shocks, while also generating broader social co-benefits, laying the groundwork for a more equitable and sustainable urban future in the Caribbean.

**9** strategic priorities identified for informal settlement upgrading in the Caribbean, including adopting risk-based, community-centred and city-wide approaches, treating tenure security as a transition along a continuum, and investing in affordable and adequate housing systems.

**Figure 15. High-level plenary session at the fifth Pacific Urban Forum in Nadi, Fiji. UN-Habitat.**


Source: UN-Habitat.

outbreaks has allowed SIDS to share insights, identify policy gaps and build capacity, all of which were highly relevant in the pandemic context (UN-Habitat, 2021a). More broadly, Pacific regional fora and organizations such as the Pacific Islands Forum, the Pacific Community and sector-based groups have strong convening, agenda setting, and advocacy power. The 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent is a key steering document for regional and national policy development and the efforts of developing partners, which highlights the need to reduce siloing of climate action and crisis recovery (UN-Habitat and CAF, 2024).

For African SIDS on the Eastern side of the continent, the Indian Ocean Commission (IOC) is a key sub-regional vehicle for promoting cooperation and knowledge circulation for resilience building among insular nations. In response to the pandemic outbreak, IOC was mobilized by member states to develop and roll out an emergency plan and a response plan for strengthening health service capacity, funded by the French Development Agency (IOC, 2020). The African Island States Climate Commission (AISCC), meanwhile, was created in 2016 under the aegis of the African Union with the intention to gather all African insular nations around the same table to address common climate challenges. Nonetheless, given the challenges associated with African SIDS 'non-region' status in the eyes of donors and their generally insular nature, strengthening knowledge exchange, joint advocacy, and solidarity within the region and with SIDS globally can be an important lever for resource mobilization and action (UN-Habitat, 2025).

Across the SIDS regions, there is room in regional collaboration to better integrate sustainable urban development considerations. In the Pacific, the Pacific Urban Partnership works to advance the objectives of the Pacific NUA, notably by convening Pacific Urban Fora convening urban stakeholders for insights sharing and constructive dialogue. Urbanization, however, could be better anchored in the agendas, strategies, architectures, and capabilities of major regional agencies, and urban practitioners given a greater voice therein (UN-Habitat, 2020b; Pacific Urban Partnership, 2023a). The pooling of experiences and expertise on sustainable urban development could supercharge the greening,

## Box 6: Participatory city resilience action planning in Comoros: Putting local governments and communities in the driving seat for capacity building and tailored solutions

The CityRAP tool is an instrument for participatory planning to progressively advance the resilience of small- to mid-sized cities. Critically, CityRAP puts local authorities, including city managers and municipal technicians, along with communities, in the driving seat of resilience action, thereby creating ownership, building capacity, and appropriately tailoring the resulting Resilience Frameworks for Action. The tool has particular applicability in SIDS as it achieves these things without requiring significant financial resources or complex technologies.

In Comoros, the CityRAP has been implemented in several cities across the three main islands, starting in the capital, Moroni. By upskilling local government focal points to lead participatory risk mapping and resilience action planning activities, this initiative achieved a better joint understanding of urban risks, greater capacity for risk management, and the creation of a roadmap for resilience building. The Moroni stakeholders identified sustainable and resilient infrastructure projects, especially sewage system interventions, as a key priority moving forward.

The CityRAP experience in Moroni demonstrates the value of local government capacity building, leadership, and meaningful community engagement in bottom-up project conception processes to achieve transformative results in SIDS's cities and communities

**Figure 16. CityRAP workshop with urban stakeholders in Mitsamiouli, Comoros**


Source: UN-Habitat

resilience-building and inclusivity of SIDS cities and human settlements (Pacific Urban Partnership, 2023b). Joint solutions identification, advocacy and resource mobilization will also enhance SIDS' chances to finance their sustainable urban development by highlighting innovations and bankable projects and supporting access to international finance streams (UN-Habitat & CAF, 2024).

Given the challenges SIDS face in mobilizing domestic resources, including small resource bases and high costs, access to international finance and collaboration for development and climate action is essential. The sources of SIDS' pandemic recovery financing varied between countries but as outlined, public debt levels spiked – and remain a challenge – for many. While most SIDS benefitted from COVID-19 debt relief measures introduced by G20 or the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (UNCTAD, 2024; World Bank, 2022), borrowings intended for development were sometimes redirected for emergency COVID-19 relief measures, and new loans taken out to service existing ones (Browne, 2021). Ad hoc approaches used to date to deal with SIDS' debt burden have proven insufficient, with repeated calls from SIDS governments and experts for urgent concessions, relief measures, write-offs or buy-outs (Bharadwaj et al., 2023; OECD, 2021; UNDP & UN-OHRLLS, 2015; UN GA, 2024). Debt-for-climate swaps represent a promising innovative vehicle for simultaneously reducing debt exposure and supporting climate change mitigation or adaptation, and which many SIDS are now exploring (Manoni, 2021).

Other encouraging innovations to address critical thematic challenges in SIDS include green, blue, social impact and catastrophe bonds (Meng et al., 2022). Tailored financing mechanisms, such as the Caribbean Biodiversity Fund and the Seychelles Climate Trust Fund, have similarly been fruitful in promoting environmental protection and climate resilience, while serving economic and social pandemic recovery purposes (UN-Habitat & CAF, 2024). Pooled funding vehicles at community-, city- or country level have also proven a valuable source of affordable finance (UN-Habitat, 2021b), while pooling of projects related to common assets (for example, nature and youth) into shared investment opportunity portfolios can improve SIDS' resource mobilization efficiency and effectiveness (Habib, 2024).

Innovative financing methods have been called for as SIDS face several barriers – including the middle-income status of many countries – to accessing traditional and concessional international development and climate finance, despite their significant vulnerabilities. As climate, health and economic crises continue to compound in small islands, there is a need to revisit eligibility criteria for concessional finance from bi- and multilateral donors to enable long-term resilience building capable of reversing this trend. Using a broader set of indicators, including different measures of social, economic and environmental vulnerability, is an important adjustment (UNDP & UN-OHRLLS, 2015).

Envelopes specially dedicated to SIDS within multilateral funds are also starting to be created, but with room for more(UN OHRLLS, 2024). Importantly, international funds can improve access for SIDS by de-complexifying application procedures and increasing the size of projects to reduce the administrative burden associated with accessing finance (Tennant et al., 2024). Learnings like these will be critical to apply as the Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage (FRLD) is operationalized, raising hope of more adequate resourcing for SIDS to deal with the extensive economic and non-economic losses and damages they experience as a result of climate change, often compounded by concurrent social, economic and health crises.

Combined with measures to increase the accessibility and generosity of international funding vehicles, demand side strategies are also important. Centrally, there is a need to increase SIDS governments' and stakeholders' technical capacity to design and implement fundable projects (UNDP & UN-OHRLLS, 2015). This includes the capacity to make the case for climate finance for a variety of interventions, including notably informal settlement upgrading, through compelling alignment with sustainability and resilience objectives (UN-Habitat, 2020e). Domestic policy reforms – with technical and financial assistance from the international community – to establish favourable legal and regulatory frameworks, develop capital markets, and improve governance structures and risk management, are also needed to attract more external finance to SIDS (Meng et al., 2022).

Finally, a lack of detailed and reliable data is a barrier to effective action on climate change, social inclusion, and economic development in many SIDS. The complex, often compound nature of crises and development challenges here makes multi-sectoral data collection and an understanding of socio-spatial dynamics all the more important. Resilience planning should be based on disaggregated data, an understanding of the dynamics of multiple hazards, multi-layered vulnerability assessments, and spatial variables (de Paula & Hosein, 2024; UN-Habitat, 2020c). Yet, SIDS national and local governments often do not have the tools and capacity to achieve such comprehensive data collection and analysis. In the pandemic aftermath, they have called on the international community to provide support for capacity building on data collection and management (UN GA, 2024). This could include staff training and exchanges, and technical assistance to introduce new technologies and methods (UN-Habitat, 2025; UN-Habitat, 2024). Suggestions have also been made for the establishment of a global data hub for SIDS to collect, consolidate and manage data on different vulnerabilities and the resources available to address them (UN OHRLLS, 2024)

**Figure 17. Destruction caused by Hurricane Irma in St Maarten.**

Source: Multiverse / Adobe Stock.

## Box 7: Multi-layered vulnerability assessment in Antigua and Barbuda: Complementing online data with ground-truthing to enable comprehensive resilience building

Antigua and Barbuda's Multi-Layered Vulnerability Assessment (MVA) exercise provides a strong example of participatory data collection, geared to inform an integrated and strategic approach to resilience building through urban, biodiversity and climate action. The approach, developed through UN-Habitat's RISE UP Flagship Programme, has ready scaling potential, using open-source global data as well as accessible insights from local consultations, interactive risk mapping exercises, policy documents and field-based public space data. In Antigua and Barbuda, the MVA process was challenged by difficulties collecting accurate and comprehensive data but was able to draw heavily on participatory approaches to gather complementary, qualitative insights. The active involvement of youth, civil society, and academia in particular assisted ground-truthing efforts and strengthened the analysis and identification of high-priority local resilience and adaptation action.

The outcome of the exercise – Antigua and Barbuda's MVA Report – explores interconnected and cascading vulnerabilities. It highlights several vulnerability hotspots where people, infrastructure and ecosystems are at heightened risk of the adverse impacts of climate change, urbanization, and biodiversity loss. In the context of intersecting crises such as the COVID-19 health emergency and accelerating climate change, an understanding of multilayered vulnerabilities and their relations is imperative. The pandemic exposed the connectedness of fragilities between and across dimensions such as public health, water and sanitation, climate change, urban planning, informality, poverty, food security, and biodiversity conservation. Learning from the pandemic means developing holistic evidence bases and strategies for a green, resilient, and pro-poor recovery leaving human settlements and ecosystems better protected to all shocks and stresses.

**Figure 18. Vulnerability hotspot mapping exercise conducted in Saint John's, Antigua and Barbuda.**

Source: UN-Habitat.

# Conclusion and recommendations

04

Though displaying rich internal diversity, SIDS are united by a number of shared challenges and opportunities. Being small, isolated, and developing, they escaped the COVID-19 virus in large part but felt the economic and social reverberations of the pandemic all the more. With the pandemic behind us and the experience of response and recovery in hand, now is an opportune time to take stock of SIDS' resilience building, sustainability, and inclusivity, and to reflect on learnings and good practices that emerged out of the crisis. These insights will be critical to leverage as SIDS remain situated in a volatile global climate and economic environment.

SIDS across the globe have demonstrated ingenuity and strength in leveraging variously traditional and innovative approaches to social protection, environmental stewardship, community participation, and regional partnership, among others. They have also collectively emphasized a still urgent need for investment across social protection, health, economic diversification and strategic urban development, which needs to be centred with local and national governments and supported by the international community. Given the multiple, often overlapping, and interrelated, risks faced by SIDS – related inter alia to climate change, biodiversity degradation, health breakdown, economic exposure, and social and institutional fragility – understanding multi-layered vulnerabilities and delivering holistic, integrated responses is especially critical. Area-based approaches to urban and territorial development, interventions in line with the One Health concept, and EbA and NbS to infrastructure and service needs, are strong candidates for broad-based and lasting resilience in the SIDS context.

In many island nations, strengthening of health systems – including better equipped and more resilient healthcare facilities and better skilled domestic workforces for enhanced system capacity and autonomy – remain needed two years after the end of the pandemic. Importantly, issues related to health and healthcare access are not uniform in SIDS societies. COVID-19 exposed injustices, where those suffering from pre-existing health complications and diseases faced reduced care capacity, while the urban poor and residents of informal settlements were both more exposed to the virus and simultaneously less likely to access information, testing and treatment.

Similarly, the patchiness of social safety nets was revealed as the pandemic sent shockwaves through SIDS' labour markets and education systems. Most affected were again those in the informal sector – uncovered by official social protection systems – and women with care duties. Kinship-, community- and faith-based solutions served as vital alternatives to official social security systems and represent a strength which SIDS can continue to draw on, while also ensuring that official reforms promote coverage, equity, and adequacy. At the macro level, the pandemic reinforced the need to strengthen SIDS' economies through both diversification and investment in industries capturing comparative advantage. Centrally, SIDS have been increasingly harnessing the ocean to their benefit and can continue to do so, growing revenue streams while protecting ecosystems, building coastal resilience, and ensuring equitable distribution of opportunities and benefits, especially for the young generation.

Urbanization presents a critical concurrent challenge and opportunity for SIDS with the potential to hinder or accelerate sustainable development, resilience, and social inclusion. Poorly planned and regulated urban growth and the rapid formation of informal settlements in many SIDS present a growing risk to public health, climate resilience, and urban and peri-urban environments and biodiversity. The pandemic experience only reinforced the need for investments in adequate and affordable housing and climate resilient and sustainable urban services and infrastructure. Evidence-based urban planning and design that emphasize strategic compactness, mixed-use development, and adequate space for public green spaces, walking, and cycling were proven critical contributors to resilient and healthy communities.

SIDS governments have been acting on this recognition, but significant opportunities remain to harness cities and urbanization for good. Increasing urban commitments in national portfolios and policies, and building capacity among local governments, are critical factors for delivering on the global NUA in SIDS. At the same time, traditional approaches to housing and local governance carry strong potential to shape a uniquely 'SIDS way' of urbanization that promotes mutually beneficial relationships between humans, animals, and nature. EbA and NbS fit neatly into this vision. Area-based approaches, meanwhile,

## Recommendations

### Health, social protection, and economic recovery

- Invest in stronger healthcare systems that are accessible to all, taking learning from champions like Cuba. Accessibility should be understood holistically: encompassing affordability, physical access through inclusive transport systems and equitable distribution of facilities, and awareness of risks and supports.

- Design more inclusive and resilient social protection systems, leveraging both formal and community-based approaches. Invest in the care economy to support working mothers, assist the young generation in accessing opportunities, and introduce protection mechanisms for the informal sector.

- Strengthen urban and peri-urban food systems for more reliable access to nutritious and affordable food. Introduce urban and peri-urban agriculture support programmes, upskilling residents and promoting sustainable land use.

- Promote investment in sectors with sightlines to growth and sustainability. This includes a focus on areas of comparative advantage, while promoting diversification to reduce risk. Building economic resilience in SIDS can with benefit involve attention to blue value chains combined with ocean stewardship.

- Harness the momentum gained during the pandemic to advance digitalization of local and national government systems, information systems, and health and education systems, facilitating work, service, and learning continuity. This must go hand in hand with enhanced infrastructure, connectivity, and digital literacy that leaves no one behind.

### Resilient cities and human settlements

- Prioritize health promoting and climate resilient upgrades of housing and essential urban infrastructure in informal settlements. Accompany this with land system reform or alternative measures to enhance land and housing availability, affordability and tenure security.

- Develop ambitious national urban policies and ensure clear roles and responsibilities for urbanization among national government ministries. In addition, place urbanization firmly on the agendas of regional and inter-regional organizations to facilitate knowledge sharing, policy cooperation and joint action.

- Strengthen spatial and land use planning to ensure that human settlement development is risk-informed, promotes sustainability and prosperity of social, economic, and environmental systems, and contributes to public health. This includes promoting a ridge-to-reef approach to protect SIDS' unique ecosystems and stimulating a dynamic and sustainable rural-urban nexus.

- Rethink neighbourhoods for enhanced strategic compactness that reduces urban environmental footprints and facilitates economies of agglomeration; mixed-use development that promotes social integration and service access; and access to public green spaces and active mobility that support public and ecosystem health.

- Continue to prioritize EbA and NbS for urban and community development that simultaneously serves adaptive, disaster risk reduction, biodiversity preserving, social and economic purposes, especially in areas experiencing high climate risk and ecosystem degradation.

### Multilevel governance and finance

- Meaningfully and inclusively engage communities in resilience building efforts, from participatory needs assessments to design, implementation and scaling of priority policies, projects, and programmes. Support community-based solutions to resilience, from socially protective kinship networks to traditional housing design and NbS.

- Bolster the capacity of local governments for service delivery and local resilience building. This involves facilitating boosted fiscal positions, building workforce skills, and harmonizing traditional and formal governance systems.

- Recognize and rectify gender inequalities in communities as well as local and national governments: promote women's participation in decision-making at all levels to pave the way for more inclusive, effective, and sustainable resilience building efforts.

- Continue to strengthen intra- and inter-regional alliances for knowledge sharing, policy collaboration, joint action, and a stronger voice for SIDS in global fora. Centre cooperation on common challenges and opportunities, including climate change, ocean ecosystems and economies, urbanization, and young populations.

- Enable greater access among SIDS to concessional international finance, especially for urgent climate and biodiversity action. This should involve steps by the international community – guided by SIDS– to expand debt relief measures, make both traditional and new, innovative financing vehicles more accessible, and protect remittances. SIDS should also work together to build resource mobilization capacity and strategies.

- Enhance capacity for data collection and management that capture layered vulnerabilities and multiple risks, notably related to climate change and urbanization. Leverage grounded, participatory approaches to bridge data gaps and consolidate a risk-mindset among governments and communities.

**Figure 19. Small islands.**

Source: Aryan R / Unsplash

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