

Highlevel Meeting

Addressing the Existential Threats Posed by Sea-Level Rise

Date: Thursday, 24 September 2026, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. and 3 to 6 p.m.

Venue: Conference Room 4, United Nations Headquarters

Concept Note

Background

Sea-level rise is no longer a distant or abstract threat. It is already affecting communities and economies in every region, intensifying coastal flooding, erosion, saltwater intrusion, and the loss of ecosystems and biodiversity that protect communities and sustain livelihoods. These pressures are expected to compound as climate-related hazards become more frequent and severe. Global mean sea level reached a record high in 2024 and its rate of rise has doubled, from 2.1 millimeters per year in 1993-2002 to 4.7 millimeters per year in 2015-2024.¹ Furthermore, El Niño event is forecast through late 2026, which will exacerbate extreme weather events.²

For small island developing States, low-lying coastal countries, delta regions, coastal communities and cities, sea-level rise threatens every dimension of sustainable development. Its effects extend to housing, health, food and water security, infrastructure, tourism, fisheries, fiscal stability, culture and heritage. It also risks reversing hard-won development gains, deepening inequality and placing additional strain on national institutions and public services.

The impacts are profoundly unequal and the burden falls disproportionately on those that have contributed least to climate change. Countries and communities with limited fiscal space, constrained institutional capacity and restricted access to finance and technology often face the highest exposure and vulnerability. Women and girls, children, older persons, persons with disabilities, Indigenous Peoples, migrants and people living in poverty often face disproportionate risks, particularly where public services, land tenure and social protection systems are weak.

Small island developing States are among the most exposed and highly vulnerable. Home to some 65 million people, they face a combination of physical vulnerability, limited land area, narrow economic bases and high dependence on coastal ecosystems and infrastructure. Sea levels are rising faster than the global average around many small island developing States, even though small island developing States collectively account for less than 1 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions. More broadly, approximately 900 million people, around one in ten people globally, live in low-elevation coastal zones, a figure projected to approach 1 billion by 2050. Sea-level rise is a particular threat to densely populated coastal countries.³

Sea-level rise raises challenges that cannot be addressed through conventional adaptation planning alone. In some circumstances, it may affect the long-term habitability of territory; the continuity of essential public services and institutions; maritime zones and entitlements; human mobility and planned relocation; and questions of statehood, identity, culture and heritage. It also poses risks to ecosystems, including coastal wetlands, coral reefs and mangroves, that provide natural protection and sustain livelihoods. A comprehensive response must therefore connect climate action and adaptation with disaster risk reduction, sustainable development, human rights, international law, peace and security and sustained international cooperation.

The General Assembly high-level meeting held 25 September 2024 elevated sea-level rise as a matter of global concern and reinforced the need for political leadership and concerted global action. The task ahead is to translate this recognition into implementation. Countries need accessible risk information, stronger institutions, investable

¹ World Meteorological Organization, *State of the Global Climate 2024*, WMO-No. 1368 (Geneva, 2025).

² World Meteorological Organization, *El Niño/La Niña Update*, June 2026; see also WMO Global Seasonal Climate Update, August 2026.

³ World Meteorological Organization, *Global Sea-Level Rise and Implications* (Geneva, 2023); see also remarks of the Secretary-General to the Security Council, 14 February 2023 (SC/15199).



adaptation plans, predictable and adequate finance, appropriate technology and long-term partnership that reach affected communities .

The high-level meeting to be held on 24 September 2026, pursuant to GA decision 78/544, will provide a platform for Heads of State and Government, ministers and other senior representatives to identify practical priorities and galvanize collective action for the coming decade. It will contribute to momentum ahead of the United Nations Conferences of the Parties on climate and biodiversity. It will also inject impetus into the UN Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (2021-2030) to stimulate ocean science and knowledge generation to reverse the decline of the state of the ocean system. The high-level meeting will focus on measures that can protect lives and livelihoods now, preserve development gains, support those facing unavoidable impacts and strengthen the international architecture for long-term response while delivering on the Sustainable Development Goals ahead of 2030.

Objectives

The high-level meeting will seek to shift the international response from fragmented initiatives towards sustained, coordinated and adequately financed action. It will renew high-level political attention to sea-level rise as a cross-cutting challenge with implications for climate action, sustainable development, peace and security, human rights and international cooperation.

The meeting will identify priority actions to strengthen coastal adaptation, disaster risk reduction, resilient infrastructure, ecosystem protection, land-use planning and early warning systems. It will also examine barriers related to finance, access to technology, data availability and institutional capacity, with particular attention to the needs of small island developing States, low-lying coastal states and other highly exposed developing countries.

In addition, the meeting will advance practical approaches to safeguard people, livelihoods, cultures and heritage, including in situations where mobility , displacement or planned relocation may become necessary.

It will promote legal certainty and strengthened international cooperation on issues related to sea-level rise, including the preservation of maritime zones, the continuity of statehood and the protection of affected populations.

- Finally, the meeting will encourage concrete commitments, partnerships and follow-up actions by Member States, the United Nations system, international financial institutions, climate funds and other relevant stakeholders.

Format and participation

The high-level meeting will consist of an opening segment followed by a plenary segment. The plenary will provide a single political forum for Member States and observers to present national priorities, announce commitments and identify gaps and proposes areas for strengthened collective action.

A list of speakers will be established in accordance with the established practices of the General Assembly. Statements will be limited to **three minutes for individual delegations and five minutes for statements delivered on behalf of groups of States**. Participation at the level of Head of State or Government, minister or other senior representative is encouraged.

Guiding questions

- What actions must be taken by 2030 to reduce exposure and protect people, critical infrastructure, freshwater resources, ecosystems, livelihoods, and cultural heritage from accelerating sea-level rise?
- How can national development plans, public investment decisions and coastal land-use policies systematically integrate long-term sea-level rise risks and uncertainty?
- What financing instruments, institutional reforms, and partnership models are needed to shift from small, short-term projects to sustained, programmatic adaptation at scale including through private-sector and philanthropic engagement?
- How can science, local and Indigenous knowledge, geospatial data and early warning systems be made more accessible and usable for national and community decision-making?
- What forms of international cooperation and coordinated support is required to address human mobility, planned relocation, legal continuity, maritime zones and the protection of identity and culture?
- How should the United Nations system, multilateral development banks, climate funds and bilateral partners organize support so that highly exposed developing countries can access it faster and on better terms?



Outcome

The President of the General Assembly will circulate an informal summary reflecting the principal messages, commitments and areas for follow-up identified during the meeting. The summary is intended to support continued consideration of sea-level rise across relevant United Nations processes, encourage implementation by Member States and international partners and help sustain momentum towards practical, coordinated and adequately financed action.