UN General Assembly High-level plenary meeting on Addressing the existential threats posed by sea-level rise

Wednesday, 25 September 2024, 10:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.
UN Headquarters, New York

Addressing Sea-Level Rise: A Global Priority

Pursuant to the General Assembly decision 78/544 of 16 January 2024 and General Assembly resolution 78/319 of 1 August 2024, the President of the UN General Assembly will convene a high-level plenary meeting on Addressing the existential threats posed by sea-level rise on 25 September 2024, during the High-Level Week of the 79th session of the General Assembly. The overall theme of the high-level meeting will be "*Addressing the threats posed by sea-level rise"*.

Among the multifaceted crises faced by people and the planet, climate change stands as perhaps the most formidable of all. Sea-level rise is unarguably foremost among its impacts. For low-lying and Small Island Developing States, no issue is more pressing or consequential. The IPCC estimates that, by 2050, global sea levels will rise between 15 and 30 centimetres, on average, with greater increases expected in equatorial regions, particularly the Pacific. Extreme sea-level events – which used to occur once every century – could become an annual phenomenon by the close of this century. Close to one billion people living in low-lying coastal zones will be directly affected due to rising sea levels and climate impacts. This issue is multidimensional and extends far beyond coastal populations – it affects every continent and region, leaving no one immune from potential catastrophe. Sea-level rise will impact communities in Small Island Developing States, as well as coastal states, and many more millions will have to adapt to floods, storms, erosion, and forced displacement. The high-level meeting on addressing the existential threats posed by sea-level rise in September will be the first of the General Assembly on this issue of significant concern for a growing number of Member States, including those most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.

Taking place on the heels of the Summit of the Future, the high-level meeting will focus on building common understanding, mobilizing political leadership, and promoting multisectoral, multi-stakeholder collaboration and international cooperation towards addressing the threats posed by sea-level rise. It aims to deliver action-oriented solutions for affected States and frontline communities as well and will be a significant step forward for enhancing action on sea-level rise.

Format

The high-level meeting will comprise an opening segment, a plenary segment, four multi-stakeholder thematic panel discussions and a brief closing segment. The opening segment will feature statements by the President of the General Assembly at its seventy-ninth session, the Secretary-General, the President of the General Assembly at its seventy-eighth session, and a representative of a Member State affected by adverse effects of sea-level rise. The plenary segment will comprise statements by Member States and Observers of the General Assembly of the United Nations and members of the United Nations specialized agencies. The closing segment will comprise summaries of the multi-stakeholder thematic panel discussions presented by the co-chairs of the panels and concluding remarks by the President of the General Assembly.

The four multi-stakeholder thematic panel discussions will be held consecutively, in parallel to the plenary segment. Each of the four multi-stakeholder panel discussions will be co-chaired by two representatives, one from a developing country and one from a developed country to be appointed by the President of the General Assembly from among the representatives attending the high-level meeting, in consultation with Member States, taking into account gender balance, and geographical representation. Summaries of the discussions will be presented by the co-chairs of the panels in the closing segment. The titles of the four panels are:

- "Knowledge, data and science to inform sea-level rise risk assessments and decision making"
- "Adaptation, finance, and resilience in relation to sea-level rise"
- "Livelihoods, socio-economic challenges, and culture and heritage in relation to sea-level rise"
- "Sea-level rise and its legal dimensions"

Provisional Programme Outline

10:00a.m. – 10:20 a.m.	**Opening Segment** o President of the General Assembly at its 79th session o Secretary-General o President of the General Assembly at its 78th session o Representative of a Member State affected by adverse effects of sea-level rise.
10:20 a.m. – 1:00 p.m.	**Plenary Segment**
10:30 a.m. – 11:45 a.m.	**Multistakeholder panel *"Sea-level rise and its legal dimensions"***
11:45 a.m. – 1:00 p.m.	**Multistakeholder panel *"Adaptation, finance, and resilience in relation to sea-level rise"***
1:00p.m. – 3:00 p.m.	**Break**

3:00 p.m. to 5:40 p.m.	**Plenary Segment**
3:00 p.m. – 4:15 p.m.	**Multistakeholder panel *"Livelihoods, socio-economic challenges, and culture and heritage in relation to sea-level rise"***
4:15 p.m. – 5:30 p.m.	**Multistakeholder panel "*Knowledge, data and science to inform sea-level rise risk assessments and decision making"***
5:40 p.m. – 6:00 p.m.	**Closing Segment** o Summaries of the multi-stakeholder thematic panel discussions o Concluding remarks by the President of the General Assembly at its 79th session

Multistakeholder thematic panel discussion on
"Sea-Level Rise and Its Legal Dimensions"

Wednesday, 25 September 2024, 10:30 a.m. to 11:45 a.m.
UN Headquarters, New York

Concept Note

Sea-level rise presents a complex array of legal challenges that require careful consideration and coordinated action at the international, regional, and national levels. This concept note outlines the critical legal dimensions of sea-level rise and areas for further exploration and discussion in the panel.

The accelerating pace of sea-level rise is increasingly impacting coastal states, which could result in significant legal implications for maritime boundaries, resource management, disaster response, and human rights. Existing legal frameworks may be insufficient to address the challenges posed by sea-level rise, creating legal uncertainty and hindering effective adaptation efforts. The International Law Commission, a subsidiary body of the UN General Assembly, established in 2018 a Study Group on sea-level rise in relation to international law with the mandate "*to produce a mapping exercise of the legal questions raised by sea-level rise and its interrelated issues*". It has produced four issues papers, focusing on issues pertaining to the Law of the Sea, Statehood, and the Protection of persons affected by sea-level rise. The four issues papers will be complemented by a consolidated and final report in 2025.

Without prejudice to existing processes, this panel will primarily take stock of the ongoing work of the ILC Study Group on sea-level rise in relation to international law, and informed by its discussions and papers, will further examine the legal dimensions of sea-level rise, including:

- **Maritime Boundaries and Jurisdiction:** Discussing sea-level rise in relation to maritime zones, baselines, and delimitation, as well as islands and archipelagos.
- **Disaster Response and Recovery:** Considering the legal basis for disaster response and recovery efforts, including the rights and obligations of States and individuals, as well as the role of international cooperation.
- **Human Rights and Displacement:** Human rights considerations in the context of sea-level rise, including the rights to life, housing, food, and cultural identity, as well as the rights of persons forcibly displaced as result of sea-level rise.
- **Statehood:** Examining the best approach to ascertain the legal basis for the continuity of statehood in situations of partial or total submergence of the land surface of a Member State as result of sea-level rise, including the affirmation of the principle of continuity of statehood.

- **International Cooperation:** Exploring the role of international and multilateral cooperation in addressing the threats posed by sea-level rise.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. *What are the key legal challenges associated with managing maritime boundaries and resources in the context of sea-level rise?*
2. *How can international law be effectively used to address the issue of climate-induced displacement and protect the rights of affected populations?*
3. *What mechanisms can be established to facilitate cooperation and knowledge sharing among states on legal aspects of sea-level rise adaptation? How best can legal gaps, and challenges be identified?*
4. *What are the most effective approaches to affirm the principle of continuity of statehood, in situations of partial or total submergence of the land surface of a Member State as result of sea-level rise, from the interpretation of existing treaties?*

Multistakeholder thematic panel discussion on
"Adaptation, Finance, and Resilience in Relation to Sea-Level Rise"

Wednesday, 25 September 2024, 11:45 am to 1:00 pm
UN Headquarters, New York

Concept Note

The accelerating pace of sea-level rise poses an existential threat to coastal communities, low-lying regions, economies, and ecosystems worldwide. Its impacts are far-reaching, encompassing displacement, infrastructure damage, agricultural losses, and biodiversity decline. Coastal areas that experienced one or two flooding events per year could see over one hundred flooding events annually in twenty years' time. To effectively address this challenge, a comprehensive approach is required that integrates adaptation measures, finance, disaster risk reduction, and building resilience.

While the scientific evidence for sea-level rise is unequivocal, the global response remains fragmented and insufficient. Many developing countries, particularly Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and Least Developing Countries lack the needed financial resources and technical capacity to anticipate the impacts and implement necessary adaptation measures. Moreover, the financial flows for climate adaptation, including sea-level rise, are significantly below the levels required to build resilience. Climate information services are essential to provide the information required to enable decision-makers to better understand and prepare for the impacts of future sea-level rise and build resilience. Implementation of "Early Warnings for All" to ensure multi-hazard early warning systems to protect everyone by 2027 is essential to reduce disaster risk from extreme coastal inundation events.

The thematic discussion will also consider the importance of mobilizing means of implementation from all sources, including adequate financial support for climate-resilient development, taking into account the specific needs and special circumstances of developing countries, especially those that are particularly vulnerable to sea-level rise.

This panel will enable a focused discussion on the critical interlinkages between adaptation, finance, and resilience in the context of sea-level rise. Key areas for exploration include:

- **Financing:** Identifying and promoting innovative financial instruments to support adaptation projects, such as green and blue bonds, climate-resilient insurance, and public-private partnerships.
- **Knowledge Sharing:** Facilitating the exchange of best practices and lessons learned on adaptation strategies, technologies, and policies among countries and regions.

- **Capacity Building:** Strengthening the capacity of developing countries, particularly SIDS to assess vulnerability, develop adaptation plans, and access climate finance.
- **Early Warning Systems:** Investing in early warning systems to enable timely responses to sea-level rise-related hazards, such as coastal flooding and erosion.
- **Ecosystem-Based Adaptation:** Promoting nature-based solutions to protect coastal ecosystems and enhance their resilience to sea-level rise.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. *How can the understanding of the financial implications of sea-level rise be enhanced?*
2. *What are the most effective financial mechanisms to mobilize resources for large-scale adaptation to sea-level rise, particularly in developing countries?*
3. *How can it be ensured that adaptation efforts are equitable and inclusive, addressing the specific needs of vulnerable communities?*
4. *What role can innovative technologies and partnerships play in building resilience to sea-level rise?*

Multistakeholder thematic panel discussion on
"Livelihoods, Socio-Economic Challenges, and Culture & Heritage in Relation to Sea-Level Rise"

Wednesday, 25 September 2024, 3:00 p.m. to 4:15 p.m.
UN Headquarters, New York

Concept Note

Sea-level rise poses a profound threat to coastal communities, with far-reaching implications for livelihoods, socio-economic conditions, and cultural heritage. As this phenomenon intensifies, it is imperative to understand the complex interplay between these factors to develop effective planning tools as well as adaptation and resilience strategies.

Rising sea levels are disrupting traditional livelihoods, such as fishing, agriculture, and tourism, leading to economic hardship and increased poverty. Coastal erosion, loss of marine ecosystems and freshwater resources, as well as inundation are causing displacement, loss of property, and infrastructure damage, exacerbating existing socio-economic inequalities. Moreover, the erosion of coastal landscapes and the displacement of communities are jeopardizing invaluable cultural heritage and traditional knowledge, including intangible heritage.

Mainstreaming anticipatory and adaptation measures in policy, planning, and investments; building government and community capacities on climate risks, impacts and adaptation strategies; and empowering communities in adaptation action in areas such as early warning systems, ecosystem-based adaptation, climate mobility strategies, coastal management, integrated water resource management, and resilient livelihoods, would offer clear adaptation pathways for a secure and resilient future.

This panel will comprehensively examine the interconnections between livelihoods, socio-economic challenges, and culture and heritage in the context of sea-level rise. Key areas for exploration include:

- **Livelihood Diversification:** Identifying and promoting alternative livelihood opportunities for coastal communities to reduce dependency on vulnerable sectors.
- **Social Protection:** Strengthening social safety nets and early warning systems to protect vulnerable populations from the impacts of sea-level rise.
- **Cultural Heritage Preservation:** Developing strategies to safeguard and protect tangible and intangible cultural heritage at risk from coastal erosion and inundation.
- **Community-Based Adaptation:** Empowering coastal communities to participate in decision-making and implement locally led adaptation measures.

- **Gender Equality:** Addressing the specific vulnerabilities of women and girls to sea-level rise and promoting their equal participation in adaptation planning and implementation.
- **Climate Mobility:** Anticipating and planning for climate mobility and forced community relocation as result of sea-level rise. Identify effective approaches to enable people-positive adaptation journeys.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. *How can the transition of coastal communities towards sustainable and diversified livelihoods be supported in the face of sea-level rise?*
2. *What are the most effective strategies for preserving cultural heritage and traditional knowledge while addressing the challenges posed by sea-level rise?*
3. *Given the complex relationship between livelihoods, socio-economic conditions, and culture and heritage, how can priority areas for investment and support be identified?*
4. *How can social protection systems be strengthened to provide adequate support for vulnerable communities affected by sea-level rise; and how can integrated adaptation strategies be developed that address the needs of diverse community members?*
5. *What are the most effective approaches for supporting governments and communities to anticipate and plan for climate mobility, enabling positive adaptation journeys for people and communities affected by sea-level rise?*

Multistakeholder thematic panel discussion on
"Knowledge, Data and Science to Inform Sea-Level Rise Risk Assessments and Decision Making"

Wednesday, 25 September 2024, 4:15 p.m. to 5:30 p.m.
UN Headquarters, New York

Concept Note

Accurate and up-to-date knowledge, data, and science are essential for effective sea-level rise risk assessments and informed decision-making. This multistakeholder thematic panel discussion aims to highlight the critical role of science as well as traditional and local knowledge in supporting adaptation and resilience strategies.

There is a direct causality between increased greenhouse gases, global warming, sea-level rise, and negative impacts along coastlines of the world. Sea levels are rising almost everywhere, and importantly, the rate at which sea levels are rising is increasing. Near-term sea-level rise is now more certain than ever. Predictions for 2020-2050 estimate an increase of 20 to 30 centimetres. Environmental impacts are multiple and profound, and include increased disaster vulnerability, flooding, erosion and freshwater contamination.

Despite significant advancements in climate science, most notably via the IPCC's 6th Assessment Report (2021), there are still knowledge gaps and data limitations that hinder our ability to accurately predict and assess the impacts of sea-level rise. Moreover, challenges exist in effectively communicating complex scientific information to policymakers and the general public in a way that supports informed decision-making. No single entity or organization holds all the data and information that is needed for comprehensive assessments of sea-level rise, and the lack of coordination to address what is a global challenge is increasingly undermining planning and response efforts.

Traditional and local knowledge also have a huge role to play when it comes to in-situ adaptation strategies as a response to sea-level rise. These include floating farms, raising the floor above high tide level, constructing stilt houses and traditional structural designs amongst others. This thematic discussion will also cover how this knowledge can be recognized, valued, supported, and incorporated into adaptation approaches.

This panel will enable a focused discussion on the following key areas:

- **Data Collection and Sharing:** Enhancing global coordination on data collection, standardization, and sharing to improve the quality and accessibility of sea-level rise data.

- **Scientific Research and Modelling:** Supporting ongoing research to improve our understanding of sea-level rise processes, including the role of ice sheets, ocean warming, and coastal dynamics.
- **Risk Assessment Methodologies:** Developing and refining risk assessment methodologies that incorporate the latest scientific knowledge and account for uncertainties.
- **Knowledge Transfer and Capacity Building:** Strengthening the capacity of developing countries and coastal communities to access, utilize, and interpret sea-level rise data and information.
- **Early Warning Systems:** Developing and implementing effective early warning systems based on robust scientific data and modelling, including with AI technology.
- **Traditional and local knowledge:** Documenting traditional and local knowledge for interpreting previously collected scientific data and guiding future work.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. *How can the accessibility and usability of sea-level rise data be improved for policymakers and practitioners at the local and national levels, to enable better-informed decision making?*
2. *What are the most critical knowledge gaps in sea-level rise science that need to be addressed to enhance risk assessment and make them more accurate and timelier?*
3. *How can scientific information on sea-level rise be effectively communicated to the public to foster informed decision-making and support adaptation measures?*
4. *How best to incorporate traditional and local knowledge in adaptation strategies?*