



## ALLIANCE OF SMALL ISLAND STATES

### AOSIS Statement

UN 2023 Water Conference  
22 – 24 March 2023, New York

Mr. President  
Distinguished Heads of State and Government  
Ministers, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

I have the honour to deliver this statement on behalf of the Alliance for Small Island States (AOSIS) and we align ourselves with the statement delivered by the Distinguished Representative of Cuba on behalf of the Group of 77 and China.

Mr. President, we would like to firstly thank you for finding the time, in this heavily packed schedule at the UN to convene this Water Conference. The time is opportune as we are at the halfway point of the International Decade of Action “Water for Sustainable Development”. More than ever there is a heightened need to urgently address water issues, as it continues to rank within the top 5 critical global crises.

Water is a fundamental part of all aspects of life and is inextricably linked to the three pillars of sustainable development. Its crosscutting nature supports the achievement of many SDGs through close linkages with climate, energy, cities, the environment, food security, poverty, gender equality and health, amongst others. With climate change profoundly affecting our economies, societies and environment, water is indeed one of the biggest deal breakers to achieve the internationally agreed water-related goals and targets, including those contained in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development for which SIDS remain a special case.

In 2023, it is sad to note that 771 million people have no access to water, while a quarter of the global population – 2 billion people – use unsafe drinking water sources. Half of humanity – 3.6 billion people – live without safely managed sanitation. And 1 in 3 people – 2.3 billion – lack basic hand washing facilities at home. We continue to struggle with properly addressing wastewater, and over 80% is released to the environment without being treated or reused. In the Caribbean, for instance, 85% of wastewater is untreated. As a consequence, wastewater discharge has destroyed 80% of the living coral reefs in the Caribbean over the past 20 years. The economic consequences of this loss is significant, especially as the reefs support both tourism and fisheries in the region.

SIDS are particularly ill-equipped for natural hazards, owing to a lack of adaptation and capacity. Each disaster costs them 17% of GDP, on average, the highest ratio of national income in the world. Further, about 90% of natural disasters are water-related, but all climate-related disasters involve water: too much or too little of it.

Small islands are increasingly being affected by climate change, which is leading to rising temperatures, more frequent and more intense tropical cyclones and storm surges, changes in rainfall patterns, droughts, sea-level rise, coral bleaching and invasive species.

In the years to come, sea-level rise is expected to double the frequency of flooding in much of the Indian Ocean and Tropical Pacific, whereas tropical cyclones will remain the main driver of flooding in the Caribbean Sea and Southern Tropical Pacific, according to the IPCC's Sixth Assessment Report.

A completely untenable situation without concerted action.

Mr President,

SIDS are among the most water-scarce countries in the world, with 7 out of 10 facing the prospect of water shortages in the future, and 9 out of 10 lying just a few meters above sea level. The main sources of freshwater in SIDS comes from groundwater and rainwater harvesting. As these countries tend to be low-lying, this further exacerbates their water situation as their groundwater is prone to saltwater intrusion. This is a profound issue for 73% of SIDS.

Further, the increasing demand from population growth and economic sectors, like tourism and the decreasing supply due to effects such as pollution and changes in precipitation patterns, further strains freshwater resources. The spillover effects of competing and conflicting demands aggravate an already precarious situation.

The effects of deforestation, waste-water run off, pesticides and fertilizers from agriculture pose additional challenges to the scarce water resources in SIDS. Coastal wetlands in the Pacific, where important staples such as taro are grown, are experiencing saltwater intrusion. Saltwater is contaminating shallow aquifers and threatening freshwater availability.

Many SIDS contend with excess precipitation from weather events, but many also face severe drought. The Sixth IPCC Report also notes that the projected changes in aridity are expected to impose freshwater stress on many SIDS. It is estimated that with a warming of 1.5°C or less, freshwater stress on small islands would be 25% less as compared to 2.0°C. Drought risk projections for Caribbean SIDS indicate that a 1°C increase in temperature could result in a 60% increase in the number of people projected to experience severe water resources stress from 2043–2071. In African SIDS, even when it rains, and that can be infrequent, approximately 20 percent of the water is lost through surface runoff, 13 percent infiltrates, while 67 percent evaporates. After a few years of severe drought, the lack of agriculture production, which is rain fed, has caused a spike in food insecurity. Coupled with the effects of the multiple crises of the 2020-2022 period, the situation is now acute.

Responses to the water challenges facing SIDS vary from region to region and state to state, but many still struggle with the basics - the tools, capacity and understanding. There is a lack of tools and methods to assess impact, vulnerability of shoreline erosion and impact on groundwater sources, design water resources supply during drought and floods, and water use in agriculture activities. The capacity to identify water sources and their volume, and mapping groundwater flows is insufficient. Also, there is a lack of understanding on how water supplies will be

impacted by rising temperatures and climate change, particularly in the smaller atoll nations that are dependent on rainwater.

Actions to address the current water and sanitation challenges in SIDS, as well as those that seek to prevent any further loss of access take many forms. In some islands, work is focused on rain water harvesting and education to guard against wastage. Larger interventions seek to address the management of the system, implementing costly desalination plants, upgrading distribution networks and treatment plants for climate resilience. All of these come at significant cost to SIDS, especially in States with numerous outer islands and territories spread across vast swaths of ocean. SIDS therefore often rely on project support to meet these interventions.

However, it is clear that if SIDS are to meet future challenges to their already limited access to safe and adequate water resources, an integrated and transformative approach remains key. The most pressing needs involve a more robust understanding of the effects of climate change on the resources of individual SIDS, so that action can be tailored and sustainable.

The action agenda emanating from this week's Conference should involve the support needed for the application of science and technology, tools and methodologies for small island developing states with particular needs and vulnerabilities. Water is a human right, but that does not matter if there is water everywhere and not a drop to drink.

AOSIS supports a vigorous action agenda. We support action for a sustainable water future for all of us.

I thank you.