



ANTICIPATING THE EXTENT AND PACE OF POPULATION AGEING IN SMALL ISLAND DEVELOPING STATES CAN HELP BUILD A MORE SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

SIDS FACE UNIQUE SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL VULNERABILITIES

SIDS¹ are a heterogeneous group of islands and coastal states with significant differences in population size and density, geographical dispersion, natural resources and development progress (United Nations, 2023a). Yet, SIDS face both common and specific challenges arising from their geographical conditions, such as heightened exposure to natural hazards and increased susceptibility to climate change and sea-level rise, among other intersecting features. Their small population size, narrow resource base and limited land area preclude economies of scale and diversification, making them more vulnerable to external shocks and stressors. Many small island economies are heavily dependent on remittances from overseas workers. Moreover, the share of informal employment and other precarious forms of work is high in many SIDS, contributing to gaps in social protection systems and exacerbating social exclusion. In addition, the rising prevalence of noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) and associated risk factors is straining healthcare systems in many SIDS.

The fourth programme of action on sustainable development for SIDS, the Antigua and Barbuda Agenda for SIDS (ABAS)² identifies these characteristics among the many factors likely to present distinct social and economic challenges for SIDS as they shift towards ageing societies. Anticipating the extent and pace of population ageing can help turn these challenges into opportunities by building a more resilient and sustainable future for these States.

MOST SIDS WILL EXPERIENCE RAPID POPULATION AGEING OVER THE NEXT FEW DECADES

Today, people aged 65 years or over represent almost 10 per cent of the total SIDS population; a share that is twice as high as in other groups of countries in special situations (United Nations, 2023a, 2024a; Box 1). Population ageing in SIDS is more advanced in the Caribbean region (CSIDS) than in the

Key Messages

- » Over the next decades, most small island developing States (SIDS) are projected to experience a rapid increase in both the share and the number of people aged 65 years or over. In half of the SIDS, the size of the older population will double between now and 2055.
- » All SIDS, even those with youthful populations today, should embrace forward-looking strategies to capitalize on the opportunities that population ageing will bring, while also addressing the context-specific challenges it may pose.
- » SIDS may wish to adopt a multifaceted, life-course approach, encompassing policies to meet the specific healthcare, food security, social protection, skills development, job creation, and investment needs of an ageing society.
- » Building the so-called “silver economy” and seizing opportunities for a “silver dividend” could not only improve the quality of life of older persons but also contribute to economic diversification, leading to a more resilient and sustainable future for SIDS.

Pacific region (PSIDS) or in the Atlantic Ocean, Indian Ocean and South China Sea region (AIS-SIDS). For example, in 2024, the share of older persons stood at 10 per cent or more in about two thirds of CSIDS, compared to nearly one third of PSIDS and one fourth of AIS-SIDS. On average, the share of older people in SIDS is projected to continue increasing and to reach 17 per cent of the total population by 2055 (Figure 1).

Box 1

Why do populations age?

Population ageing, which results in a rising share of older persons in the total population, is an inevitable outcome of the demographic transition towards longer lives and smaller families (United Nations, 2023b). In most SIDS, life expectancy at birth has reached 75 years or more, while the average level of fertility is now below 2 births per woman over a lifetime.³ In addition, high levels of emigration, both historically and in recent years, have contributed to increasing the share of older persons in some island States.⁴

In almost all populations, women outlive men on average. The female survival advantage becomes more noticeable at older ages, when many older women are widowed and often living alone. Although women generally live longer, they tend to spend a higher proportion of their later years living with ill health and disability compared to men.

¹ Small island developing States (SIDS) are a distinct group of 37 Member States and 20 non-Member States/Associate Members of the United Nations regional commissions, as classified in November 2024. Twenty-nine SIDS are located in the Caribbean region, 20 in the Pacific region and 8 in the Atlantic Ocean, Indian Ocean and South China Sea (AIS) region. See: https://sdgs.un.org/topics/small-island-developing-states#list_of_sids.

² The ABAS was adopted during the Fourth International Conference on Small Island Developing States (Antigua and Barbuda, 27-30 May 2024). See: A/CONF.223/2024/4, endorsed by the General Assembly in A/RES/78/317.

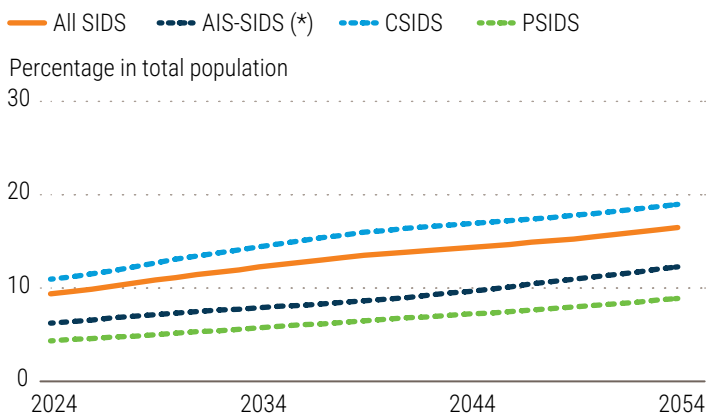
³ The fertility level necessary for a population to remain stable in the long run is around 2.1 live births per woman over a lifetime, in a population with relatively low levels of mortality and zero net migration.

⁴ Most international migrants are of working age (between 20 and 64 years of age). High levels of emigration can contribute to population ageing by reducing the share of working-age people in the total population.

Figure 1

Population ageing is most advanced among SIDS in the Caribbean region

Projected share of the population aged 65 years or over in SIDS, by region



Source: United Nations (2024a).

Notes: AIS-SIDS, CSIDS and PSIDS refer to the SIDS in the Atlantic Ocean, Indian Ocean and South China Sea region, in the Caribbean region and in the Pacific region, respectively.

(*) Excludes Singapore, where older persons comprised 14 per cent of the total population in 2024, contributing 69 per cent of the AIS-SIDS older population. Intra-regional variation exists in all three SIDS regions, with the share of the older population ranging from 5 to 25 per cent in Caribbean SIDS, from 3 to 16 per cent in Pacific SIDS and from 3 to 13 per cent in AIS-SIDS excluding Singapore.

The number of persons aged 65 years or over in all SIDS, which stood at 6.9 million in 2024, is projected to reach 10 million in the mid-2030s and could climb to 15 million by the late 2050s (United Nations, 2023a, 2024a). In 28 SIDS, the size of the older population is expected to double between now and 2055 (Figure 2). This group includes several States where population ageing is already more advanced, such as Antigua and Barbuda, Jamaica and Suriname in the Caribbean, some of the French territories in the Pacific and Singapore in the AIS region. The older population is also projected to grow rapidly in States where its current share of the total remains small. These include Belize, Guyana and Haiti in the Caribbean; Kiribati, Papua New Guinea and Timor-Leste in the Pacific; and Comoros, Guinea-Bissau and Sao Tome and Principe in the AIS region.

In four of the five most populous SIDS—Dominican Republic, Haiti, Papua New Guinea and Singapore—the older population is projected to double in size sometime between the late 2030s and the late 2040s.⁵ Combined, these four States are home to more than half of the older population currently residing in SIDS.

POPULATION AGEING POSES DISTINCT CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN SIDS

The rapid increase in the share and number of older persons poses context-specific challenges for SIDS. For example,

⁵ In Cuba, which has a total population similar in size to that of Haiti or the Dominican Republic, the older population is expected to grow rapidly until the late 2030s and then stabilize in size.

in SIDS where formal employment is low and where financial support at older ages is provided primarily by family members, rapid ageing of the population could put large numbers of people, particularly older women, at heightened risk of economic insecurity (United Nations, 2023b).⁶ Several SIDS, including Comoros, Timor-Leste, and Tonga, have high shares of informal employment, or face pressing shortages of doctors, nurses, and other health workers.⁷

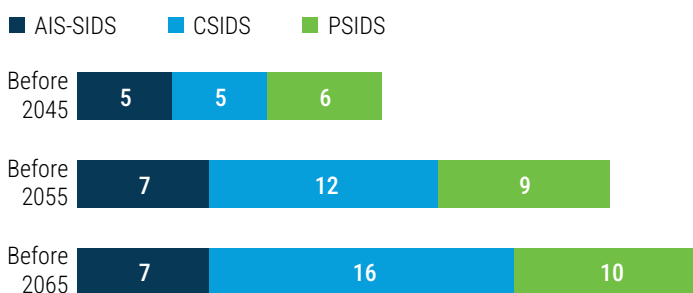
Food systems, unhealthy diets, and the growing burden of NCDs pose a major challenge for many SIDS. Due to geographical and socioeconomic factors, including remoteness, small population size and limited availability of land, agriculture in SIDS is often uncompetitive, making SIDS highly dependent on imported foods, which are often ultra-processed and thus high in sugar, salt and fat. In many SIDS, unhealthy diets associated with rising consumption of ultra-processed foods have been the leading cause of a rapid increase in obesity, particularly among women (FAO, UN-OHRLS and UNDESA, 2017; WHO, 2023a). Thirteen of the top 15 countries with the highest adult obesity prevalence worldwide are Pacific SIDS. Nine SIDS, mostly in the Pacific region, are among 20 countries with the highest mortality rates attributed to NCDs, including cardiovascular disease, cancer, diabetes or chronic respiratory disease.⁸ As SIDS populations continue to age, the burden of these chronic diseases is likely to rise further unless concrete steps are taken.

Population ageing also presents distinct opportunities. SIDS economies, for instance, could expand markets for products and services aimed at the older population, known as the “silver economy” (Sánchez and others, 2020). Strengthening healthcare and home care systems, and investing in infrastructure, transport and other service-driven subsectors targeting the needs of older persons, including returning migrants, could offer economic growth and diversification opportunities and contribute to greater economic resilience.

Figure 2

Within 40 years, the number of older persons is expected to double in most SIDS

Number of SIDS in which the population aged 65 years or over is projected to double by 2045, 2055 or 2065, by region



Source: United Nations (2024a).

⁶ The adequacy of the coverage and benefits of pension systems and other social protection programmes varies significantly among SIDS (ADB, 2024; IDB, 2024; ILO, 2022).

⁷ See: ILO Statistics on the informal economy, July 2024. Accessed on 19 December 2024; WHO health workforce support and safeguards list 2023.

⁸ See: Global Health Observatory, latest estimates. Accessed on 26 November 2024.

In addition, training and education programmes for older persons on healthy ageing and disaster preparedness and response could generate new jobs in those sectors.

Moreover, because persons aged 65 or over in SIDS increasingly participate in the labour force,⁹ creating decent and productive employment opportunities for older workers can also generate valuable human capital resources, particularly in States where population size is projected to decline (United Nations, 2024b). This “silver dividend” (ADB, 2024; Park and Shin, 2023) can promote intergenerational solidarity, increase autonomy and well-being at older ages, and expand SIDS’ productive capacities in traditional and new sectors of the economy.

POLICIES TO PROMOTE INCLUSIVE SOCIETIES FOR ALL AGES

Creating socially inclusive communities for all ages in line with the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing 2002 (MIPAA)¹⁰ requires a forward-looking, multifaceted, life-course approach, encompassing policies to expand access to healthcare and social protection and promote skills development and job creation. For SIDS facing the rapid ageing of their populations, selected strategies to promote supportive environments and lay the ground for a silver dividend are presented below. These approaches must be tailored to address differences among SIDS in their demographic situations and in their social, economic and environmental contexts.¹¹

First, SIDS should consider strengthening and building more equitable and resilient social protection systems to increase financial security at older ages. As population ageing accelerates in SIDS, greater efforts are needed to strengthen contributory and non-contributory pension systems to ensure economic security among older persons and their families (Figure 3). Combining such systems with mechanisms to create decent jobs, particularly in economies with a high degree of informality, and to allow flexible retirement schemes for older persons who desire to continue to work and can do so, will help ensure more adequate social protection at older ages, especially for women, with potential beneficial spillovers to family members and communities at large.

In addition, rapid population ageing in SIDS requires implementing or strengthening social protection mechanisms aimed at providing food, healthcare and other services to older persons affected by disasters caused by natural hazards, health emergencies and other external shocks. Experiences from the Dominican Republic,¹² Fiji,¹³ Jamaica¹⁴ and the ASEAN region¹⁵ in implementing adaptive social

protection and shock-responsive social protection (ASP and SRSP),¹⁶ as well as anticipatory social safety net mechanisms, can help chart a course towards more resilient systems in other SIDS.

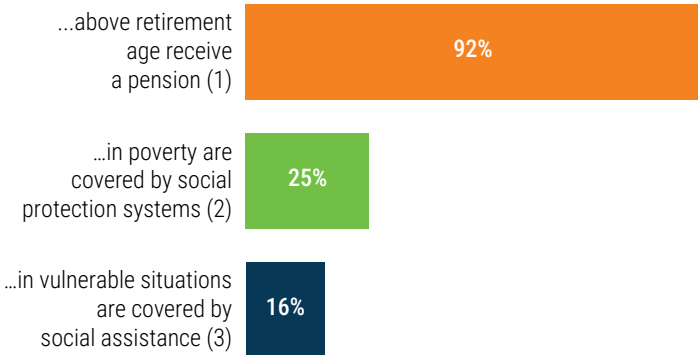
Second, SIDS should seek to support local food production, increase food security, and promote healthy diets at all ages to reduce the rising incidence of NCDs and promote healthy ageing. Supporting and investing in sustainable local agriculture, fisheries, and aquaculture and forestry can help reduce SIDS’ dependency on imported foods while advancing overall food security and nutrition, resulting in more sustainable and climate-resilient societies with ageing populations (WHO, 2023a, 2023b).¹⁷

Gender-sensitive campaigns to promote physical activity and healthy diets from childhood and throughout the life course can also help reduce the growing incidence of NCDs. As SIDS populations continue to age, it will be critical to strengthen health systems, including building and retaining a skilled health workforce, focusing on primary healthcare, universal health coverage and long-term care (United Nations, 2023b; WHO, 2021). Expanded use of digital health applications and real-time remote medicine can contribute to the prevention and early diagnosis of NCDs, reducing expenditures for long-term healthcare services and helping to reach the furthest behind first (Pacific Communities and WHO, 2023). Putting in place or enhancing data systems to monitor the specific needs of older persons will help lower healthcare costs and address their vulnerabilities.

Figure 3
Strong social protection systems increase financial security at older ages

Effective social protection coverage indicators in SIDS

Proportion of SIDS where more than half of the people...



Source: Social Security Inquiry Database, SDG indicator 1.3.1 - Proportion of population covered by social protection floors/systems (percentage), latest available estimates. Accessed on 04 December 2024.
Notes: Available data for: 24 SIDS for (1); 19 SIDS for (2); 25 SIDS for (3). For the definition of social protection indicators, see: <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/metadata>.

⁹ See: ILO modelled estimates, November 2023. Accessed on 2 December 2024.
¹⁰ See: E/CN.5/2023/6 on the Fourth review and appraisal of the MIPAA and its regional reviews.
¹¹ While most SIDS are high- and upper-middle income countries, traditional measures used to allocate concessional resources, such as GNI per capita, are insufficient to capture their vulnerabilities and financing needs. See: [Financing for Sustainable Development Report 2024](#).
¹² See: [Unleashing Adaptive Potential for Social Protection](#).
¹³ See: [Case study on Fiji's Anticipatory Action Framework](#).
¹⁴ See: [Social Protection Strategy. 10th Anniversary edition](#).
¹⁵ See: [Adopting anticipatory action and shock responsive social protection to strengthen disaster preparedness and resilience: Learning from the ASEAN region](#).

¹⁶ ASP and SRSP refer to the use of pre-existing social protection infrastructure following a disasters or other shocks to help mitigate their impacts.
¹⁷ Older persons, who are often repositories of traditional knowledge, can play a critical role in guiding the adoption of sustainable, regenerative methods.

Third, SIDS should expand opportunities for life-long learning and digital literacy, facilitating the employment of older persons who wish to continue working. As SIDS undergo a digital transformation, building digital literacy skills among older persons, including through inclusive adult learning and education strategies, will increase connectivity and contribute to bridging digital divides and growing a “digital culture” that spans generations. Universities of the Third Age and other lifelong learning initiatives¹⁸ offer online training opportunities for older persons, including reskilling and upskilling programmes with a focus on “green and decent” jobs (ILO, 2017).

Incentives for employers to hire and retain older workers, including through flexible working arrangements, can help encourage older persons to stay in the workforce.¹⁹ Improving access to digital tools for the financial inclusion of older persons can promote entrepreneurship and facilitate paths into sectors with high digital potential, such as tourism and climate-smart industries (ADB, 2024; UNDP, 2024).

Lastly, SIDS must empower the older population through participation and engagement in climate justice and disaster prevention and management. The increasing frequency and intensity of natural hazards pose a growing threat to the well-being of SIDS’ populations. Older persons, including retirees, community leaders and women, have the potential to become advocates for action on climate change. Civic participation and meaningful engagement can open new pathways for older persons to express their concern for and commitment to the well-being of future generations (Pillemer and others, 2022), mobilize other members of their communities, and promote intergenerational solidarity.

By advocating for age- and gender-responsive, people-centered early warning systems, older adults can support disaster risk reduction efforts in SIDS and mobilize their community knowledge to increase the effectiveness of such systems.²⁰ Through skills development and awareness campaigns focused on the impact of climate change at the local level, older persons can become stewards for climate action.

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¹⁸ Examples of older adult education opportunities among SIDS are The Asia Pacific Alliance of Universities of the Third Age and several universities in Cuba, Dominican Republic, Mauritius and Singapore.

¹⁹ Singapore has implemented part-time re-employment grants for employers to recruit older workers. *Barbados 2023-2028 National Policy on Ageing* outlines the country’s objectives to improve the employability and employment prospects of older persons.

²⁰ See, for example, the experience of women-led multihazard early-warning systems in [Fiji](#), [Tonga](#), [Papua New Guinea](#) and [Vanuatu](#).