



Commonwealth
Jewish Council



Action Briefing Small Islands: Big challenges

In support of Small Island States

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Foreword

In the Jewish tradition there are countless laws and precepts which urge us to be cognisant of and act responsibly toward the natural world around us. It does more than exhort us not to be self-absorbed and to fail to appreciate what exists beyond ourselves but rather it directly asks us to address the challenge of sometimes being at odds with nature and accepting its power. There are many mandates which cover a range of behaviours but the most fundamental principle is that we are obliged to be the guardians of the planet and so we must sometimes restrain and modify our conduct for the sake of a greater good.

In the Jewish calendar, the festival of Tu B'Shvat has become the moment when we remind ourselves of the environmental concerns at the heart of our tradition. Although the name of the festival is literally the date, the 15th day of the month of Shvat, it denotes the time which appears in the Talmud as the new year for trees. The date enables the calculation of time passing and for the regulation of certain significant moments relating to farming such as planting and sowing. But today the festival combines a variety of religious and mystical moments with the opportunity to reflect on what we have done to create a sustainable future.

The Commonwealth Jewish Council – deeply aware of the challenges of many of our communities and the communities with whom we connect across the Commonwealth – intends to help support the issues facing the Small Island Developing States (SIDS). This group has developed a strong working relationship since the 1990's and works together to confront shared sustainable development challenges. Twenty three Small Island States are in the Commonwealth.

On this year's Tu B'Shvat we are adopting as our principal advocacy focus the championing of small islands nations in their fight to retain their traditional homelands, prepare for the ever more destructive forces of climate change as well as to urge Jewish communities to act responsibly at home and in solidarity with the SIDS. We hope to add our voices to theirs and encourage the Commonwealth and other international and national actors to take more and stronger action.

Managing climate change requires a concerted international effort, both to reduce greenhouse gas emissions contributing to and aggravating for climate change, and to provide resources to help developing countries mitigate and adapt to its catastrophic effects. We fully support the effort to get Commonwealth governments to support Small Islands States by fully implementing the Paris Agreement. But we hope for more. We hope to help develop durable partnerships that can deal with the challenges of weather extremes and climate change and their terrible impacts. We want to help across the range of need, from finding ways to build early warning systems and adaptation measures to mechanisms to build resilient communities. Our tradition places us firmly on the side of the SIDS and we make ourselves available to help our friends and colleagues in whatever way we can and with great determination to protect the value and awe we have for all of creation.

We look forward to what we can contribute to this cause in the years ahead.

Jon Mendelsohn

President

Introduction

This pack represents the Commonwealth Jewish Council's first articulation of the issues facing small islands as we see them, from both a Commonwealth and a Jewish perspective. It explains our motivation, our concerns (not of course unique to us!), and recommendations for action both within and beyond the Jewish communities that are our affiliates.

At the recent CHOGM in London, our CJC representatives were moved by the shocking pictures from island nations in the Pacific as to the extent of the challenges they now face as a result of rising sea levels. We knew anyway that the CHOGM was being held in London as a result of Vanuatu, the original host for the event, being so damaged by cyclones that it could not receive us after all. In that one highly symbolic fact, we are all forced to recognize both the vulnerability of these small nations combined with their limited resources to withstand or confront the literally global threats ranged against them on their own. So, we must help.

But what to do? Jews live and are organized into communities in about 75% of the countries of the Commonwealth. Some of these communities are small or even tiny, while others are well organized and extensive.

We propose a twin focus to our campaign.

- Firstly, we will seek to empower and encourage our communities to add their voices to others in the field to persuade their governments, both local and national, to redouble their efforts to ameliorate the effects of climate change and to amend their policies to respond to those impacts that cannot be resisted or ameliorated. That must include helping small island nations as well as amending their policies to be more ready to accommodate those driven from their homes by such climate change impact.
- Secondly, of course, we will seek to encourage our affiliate communities to upgrade their own responses to climate change by adjustments to their behaviour and consumption, not because that will make *the* difference, but because it will make *a* difference. As our rabbis commented 2,000 years ago in relation to any task that requires our attention:

'We are not able to complete the task, but neither are we free to desist from it'.

Clive A Lawton

Chief Executive

Understanding the impact of climate change on the Small Island States

As demonstrated in recent years by increasingly catastrophic weather in the South, many Commonwealth countries in the 21st century are facing especially dire consequences of climate change through extreme, existential challenges.

23 members of the Alliance of Small Island States (see box) are also members of the Commonwealth. Despite their inherent diversity, all of the Small Island States are pressed with risks ranging from extreme weather causing massive public safety, public health and rapid infrastructure degradation; potential severe economic hardship including damage to tourism industries; the destruction of coral reefs and other natural ecosystems; and most alarmingly, their key climate-change related threat is sea-level rise resulting ultimately in the potential disappearance of some of these islands altogether.

The challenges posed by climate change are well documented. Furthermore, the inherent injustice of the load of the challenge falling not only on those who least caused it, but also on those least able to confront it should be shocking to anyone with even a basic sense of natural justice. The disproportionate impact on developing countries, as the least contributors to the phenomenon, is often contrasted with their comparatively limited capacity to respond to the climatic challenge.

Members of the Alliance of the Small Island States

Antigua and Barbuda (C), Bahamas (C), Barbados (C), Belize (C), Cape Verde, Comoros, Cook Islands, Cuba, Dominica (C), Dominican Republic, Fiji (C), Federated States of Micronesia, Grenada (C), Guinea-Bissau, Guyana (C), Haiti, Jamaica (C), Kiribati (C), Maldives, Marshall Islands, Mauritius (C), Nauru (C), Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea (C), Samoa (C), Singapore (C), Seychelles (C), Sao Tome and Principe, Solomon Islands (C), St. Kitts and Nevis (C), St. Lucia (C), St. Vincent and the Grenadines (C), Suriname, Timor-Leste, Tonga (C), Trinidad and Tobago (C), Tuvalu and Vanuatu (C). Observers: American Samoa, Netherlands Antilles, Guam, U.S. Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico.



Understanding the impact of climate change on the Small Island States

Adding to the existing capacity constraint on their human and material resources – many of these countries have challenge enough in their ongoing efforts to fight their way out of basic poverty and to bring many of the services up to a standard that so many other around the world take for granted – these small island states are now also faced with the urgent need to become climate-resilient when their physical existence is threatened or to engage in the costly and distressing need to plan for their own deterioration - to the point, in some cases, of disappearance.

Already many of the states about which we are concerned are facing more and more regular devastation through extreme weather forces – cyclones, hurricanes and the like – while others are finding their agricultural land increasingly encroached upon and ruined by rising seas levels and therefore the salination of their previously useful land. In some cases, the prospect of their islands simply disappearing beneath the waves is real and approaching.



Picture credit: “Enhancing 'whole of islands' Approach to Strengthen Community Resilience to Climate and Disaster Risks in Kiribati” United Nations Development Programme.

The evidence today for rapid climate change

The Earth's climate has changed throughout history. Debate about who caused the current evident trend and whether or not it is mostly man-made seems fruitless at this time. What is important is deciding what to do and to act. Even if most of the current events were not caused by human action over the years, we do know that we can have some effect on diminishing the trend by collective human action. The following factors are unequivocally proven to be caused by warming of the climate system:

Global temperature rise - The planet's average surface temperature has risen about 1.62 degrees Fahrenheit (0.9 degrees Celsius) since the late 19th century, a change almost certainly driven largely by increased carbon dioxide and other human-made emissions into the atmosphere

Warming Oceans - The oceans have absorbed much of this increased heat, with the top 700 meters (about 2,300 feet) of ocean showing warming of more than 0.4 degrees Fahrenheit since 1969

Shrinking ice sheets - Greenland lost an average of 281 billion tons of ice per year between 1993 and 2016, while Antarctica lost about 119 billion tons during the same time period. The rate of Antarctica ice mass loss has tripled in the last decade.

RAPID CLIMATE CHANGE CAUSES

- **GLOBAL TEMPERATURE RISE**
- **WARMING OCEANS**
- **SHRINKING ICE SHEETS**
- **GLACIAL RETREAT**
- **DECREASED SNOW COVER**
- **SEA LEVEL RISE**
- **DECLINING ARCTIC SEA ICE**
- **EXTREME EVENTS**
- **OCEAN ACIDIFICATION**

The evidence today for rapid climate change

Glacial retreat - Glaciers are retreating almost everywhere around the world — including in the Alps, Himalayas, Andes, Rockies, Alaska and Africa.

Decreased snow cover - Satellite observations reveal that the amount of spring snow cover in the Northern Hemisphere has decreased over the past five decades and that the snow is melting earlier.

Sea level rise - Global sea level rose about 8 inches in the last century. The rate in the last two decades, however, is nearly double that of the last century and is accelerating slightly every year.

Declining Arctic sea ice - Both the extent and thickness of Arctic sea ice has declined rapidly over the last several decades.

Extreme events – With the Earth getting hotter, heat waves become more intense and more frequent. High temperatures evaporate more water, so average global rainfall increases too. With more energy and water vapor in the system, circulation patterns change how weather systems develop, causing severe storms in some regions and drought in others.

Ocean acidification - Since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, the acidity of surface ocean waters has increased by about 30 percent. This increase is the result of

“97% of climate scientists agree that climate-warming trends over the past century are very likely due to human activities and most of the leading scientific organisations worldwide have issued public statement’s endorsing this position.” **[NASA - Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change]**

The evidence today for rapid climate change

more carbon dioxide in the atmosphere and hence more being absorbed into the oceans. The amount of carbon dioxide absorbed by the upper layer of the oceans is increasing by about 2 billion tons per year.

For the first time in history, at COP2 in December 2015 the [Paris Agreement](#) was put in place and united all the world's nations in a single agreement on tackling climate change.

The central aim of the Paris Agreement is to strengthen the global response to the threat of climate change by keeping a global temperature rise this century well below 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels and to pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase even further to 1.5 degrees Celsius. Additionally, the agreement aims to strengthen the ability of countries to deal with the impacts of climate change.

"It is a victory for the most vulnerable countries, the small islands, the least developed countries and all those with the most to lose, who came to Paris and said they didn't want sympathy, they wanted action."

To reach these ambitious goals, appropriate financial flows, a new technology framework and an enhanced capacity building framework will be put in place, thus supporting action by developing countries and the most vulnerable countries, in line with their own national objectives. The Agreement also provides for enhanced transparency of action and support through a more robust transparency framework. Recent discussions in Katowice in Poland have further formalized agreement on this transparency framework.

What is needed to assist Small Island States?

Small Island States have been very active at the Commonwealth. At the 2018 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) the ensuing resolution placed a special emphasis on the plight of small states, which was moved to London following cyclone damage to the original host country of Vanuatu. CHOGM outcomes included a commitment to the Commonwealth Blue Oceans Charter on sustainable development and an agreement to work together to combat climate change.

These renewed commitments toward combatting climate change and supporting small, vulnerable Commonwealth member states are important steps, but pressure must be maintained on Commonwealth governments to take further, more concrete action to support its more vulnerable members.

The CIC believes that the Jewish communities of the Commonwealth can have a valuable role in ensuring these issues remain on domestic and international agendas. With a view to empowering local champions, we outline tangible demands CIC member communities should ask of their governments.

What is needed to assist Small Island States?

Managing climate change requires a concerted international effort both to reduce greenhouse gas emissions responsible for climate change, and the provision of resources to help developing countries mitigate and adapt to its catastrophic effects.

Commonwealth governments can support small island states through:

- fully implementing commitments and obligations under the [Paris Agreement](#);
- closing the [funding gap for adaptation](#), which trails far behind climate finance provided for mitigation. Commonwealth countries can remedy this with a larger share of public and grant-based sources of finance reserved for adaptation;

What is needed to assist Small Island States?

- ensuring the [UN Security Council is employed](#) to address clear threats to the security and survival of any country, from climate risks as much as from conventional threats;
- enhancing resilience through [assisting in the rebuilding of housing stock](#) in compliance with newly-imposed cyclone building standards, ensuring that coastal developments are above tsunami and storm surge levels, considering climate change and sea-level rise when rebuilding infrastructure and enforcing of minimum construction standards;
- committing to supporting human settlement and infrastructure through [assisting with hazard mapping](#), improved forecasting and early warning systems, as well as insurance provision.
- supporting public health through [the development of a health surveillance and forecast system](#); strengthening of data collection and reporting systems; vaccination and other public health education campaigns.
- supporting [enhanced water resources](#) through more efficient management of both demand and supply; improved monitoring and forecasting systems for floods and droughts; desalinization of sea water

“Recognising that much more work still needs to be done towards meeting our commitments, while acknowledging the unique vulnerability and capacity challenges faced particularly by least developed, small coastal and island states, and landlocked states, and therefore the importance of intra-Commonwealth cooperation.”

[The Commonwealth Blue Charter: Shared Values, Shared Ocean, 2018]

The Jewish response to issues faced by Small Island States

Triggered by Tu B'Shvat, [the Jewish New Year for Trees](#), this year on 21st January, the Commonwealth Jewish Council is adopting as its principal advocacy focus for 2019 the championing of small island states in their fight to retain their traditional homelands, prepare for the ever more destructive forces of climate change and to urge Jews to act responsibly at home and to engage in active advocacy to spur their governments to increased action.

Jews know about losing our home. Not only the original catastrophic uprooting from our ancient homeland in [Israel 2,600 years ago](#), but repeatedly ever since forced to leave this or that country, our hearts go out to those facing a similar prospect. We know what it is like to feel friendless and homeless. The Bible marks the first of these displacements - "By the Rivers of Babylon, I lay down and wept when I remembered Zion" (psalm 137)

We want to ensure that those facing these challenges know they have a friend in the CJC and our member communities. We do not want them to feel the hopelessness that struck Jewish communities through the centuries when forced to move on from places sometimes their home for millennia. We know that the Jews are not going to be the ones to make all the difference, [but what difference we can make, we will](#).

The two great clusters of islands in the Commonwealth are in [the Caribbean and the Pacific](#). The Caribbean has a long and proud history of Jewish settlement and Jews over the centuries have contributed richly to those islands' developments. In the Pacific on the other hand there has been virtually no Jewish presence. But we do not make a distinction between these two. [The need is real](#) in these and other places. Our concern is a basic human one, driven by our traditions and teachings. We want to be true to those.

The Jewish response to issues faced by Small Island States

The Jewish default position – that the world is here for humanity's use – does not prevent the existence of, for example, Jewish vegetarians. It has long been recognised that with great power comes great responsibility and the Torah, for example, makes it clear that people cannot just treat natural resources any way they like. They must conserve and hand on. Our rabbis imagine God, as He takes Adam round the Garden, saying: 'Treat it with care, since if you spoil it, there'll be no-one else to put it right'. The Jewish tradition also builds out from a line in the Book of Deuteronomy in the Torah,

“Every major faith has developed a statement about its relationship with nature. The world, despite all its problems, is still a beautiful place.

Sometimes it is the role of faiths, within all the doom and gloom of ecological predictions, to remind people to celebrate the beautiful, good, heroic and brave things about the world and about life. Celebrate good new developments, the potential for better protection of habitats and ecosystems.” **[Roadmap 2030]**

which commands that fruit trees should not be damaged when waging war, that every kind of waste is forbidden in Jewish Law. For example, the great 12th Century rabbi Maimonides teaches that one should use both sides of a sheet of paper.

The Jewish festival of Tu B'Shvat which we at the CJC are using for the launch occasion for this campaign, has long taught Jews to value trees and plant them. One rabbi tells of an old man planting a tree from which he will not live long enough to benefit because he found trees in the world when he was young planted by others who went before, while another rabbi opines that if you are in the middle of planting a tree and someone comes to tell you that the Messiah has come, finish planting the tree first before going to join him!

The Jewish response to issues faced by Small Island States

Equally important, all the bounty that God gives us should be reasonably shared and the rights of all to benefit from the world and its resources has resulted in rich traditions of helping everyone stand on their own feet and achieve a good quality of life. Jews note clearly that Adam, our universal ancestor was not a Jew but an 'Everyman', indicating that [the world was given to all of humanity to enjoy](#).

Jewish tradition is unashamed about the right of humanity to manipulate the world for its advantage. We believe confidently in the use of human ingenuity to fix the world and its problems. That is why this need – to address the current issues facing the whole human population of the planet, let alone all the other flora and fauna who share it with us - urgently demands our attention and best efforts. [If we're in charge, we'd better take responsibility](#).

Jews do not advocate a return to primitive simplicity or a refusal to use all our fabulous developments achieved through the ages. We demand the very best of every country and person to use their greatest powers to co-operate to work our way through this problem too. Neither to despair, nor to ignore. Either of those approaches is irresponsible.

[Jews note that the world was put into the care and power of human beings, but stewardship also requires responsible management](#).

The Commonwealth is an organisation built on the wonderful concept of voluntary co-operation. We in the Commonwealth have a chance to show the rest of the world a way forward through creative solutions and determined action, caring for the vulnerable and needy and sharing our magnificent collective resources, both of wealth and ideas.

But we also know that we are unlikely to offset all the impending dangers in time. Some will almost certainly suffer, and that is when governments have a responsibility to act again. Despite the growing voices demanding ever more closed borders and ever less

The Jewish response to issues faced by Small Island States

trusting responses to refugees, the Commonwealth and its governments must show that we are not going to abandon those left destitute through no fault of their own – and often through the thoughtless – to be fair, originally ignorant – actions of other richer nations.

Jewish teaching and Jewish experience tell us much of value about how to deal with the needy and the weak, the vulnerable and the homeless. No sentence appears more frequently in the Torah (over 30 times) than that we should ‘care for the stranger, since we ourselves were strangers in Egypt’. Indeed, some Jewish thinkers speculate that the whole reason why Jews were forced into slavery all those millennia ago was to teach us that very concern for the stranger though our own fundamental formative experience. As a result, Jews have usually been in the forefront of initiatives around the world for human rights, equality and civil rights.

Equally importantly, the Torah tells us that God despaired of humanity once and sent a great Flood to destroy the world, except for one frail human family, that of Noah. Afterwards, God promised that He would never again seek to destroy the world. Sadly though, He never said he would stop us doing so. He gave us all freewill, to use for good or ill. This is a moment when we can be our best selves -or our most selfish and destructive. We hope the Jewish communities of the Commonwealth will be a beacon and a goad, an encouragement and an ally, to ensure that the world’s humanity sees off this current evident threat to the future of our children’s and our grandchildren’s world.

And where we can’t do that, we must set our children and grandchildren an example of how to support each other and, as the Torah teaches, love our neighbour - in our fast, interconnected world, that’s everyone – as ourselves.

Jews are an activist people. The one thing we can’t do is ... nothing.

What should Jewish communities do?

Public advocacy

- Contact the relevant government department, both officials and politicians, and discover what is being done in your country in relation to the seven courses of action that are necessary, listed on pages 7 and 8 of this document.
- Find out in what way your government is contributing to the Commonwealth's Blue Charter and whether there is more that can be done.
- Contact other religious groups to join your voice to theirs on this matter. The world over, Jews work successfully with Christian, Muslim and other groups for improvements in public life and policy. Make this one of your target projects.
- Investigate your country's policy on the acceptance of asylum seekers and refugees in expectations that there will be more migration as a result of the failure of governments to get to grips with the challenges of climate change earlier. Urge on government officers and ministers the fundamental need to accept some of the consequences of increased migration arising from the growing plight of small island nations and others.
- Encourage your government to discover whether or not it could use Israel's outstanding record of technological development and provision for agriculture under extreme conditions.

Internal Jewish community activity

- If your community has a synagogue or other building, conduct an environmental responsibility survey, along the lines of the 'Eco-Synagogue initiative', and act on its findings.
- Develop an element in your children's Jewish educational programme, addressing the issues explored above and seeking to raise their consciousness of both the issues and what they can do to make them more responsible environmentally.
- Conduct a Mitzvah Day project, preferably in collaboration with another local non-Jewish community, making some kind of improvement to the local environment.
- Review your own lifestyle and use of unnecessary materials, packaging and such, and change your behaviour. (Remember Maimonides's advice! The mitzvah of not wasting or needlessly destroying is called 'Bal Tashkhit'.)
- Be prepared to become a bit of a bore with friends and colleagues so that all around you know that this is an issue that you won't let go of. Be prepared to call out environmental carelessness, as you might sexism or racism or anti-Semitism, when you see or hear it.

(Should you want any further information to bolster your approach, templates of letters you might send, or how to contact any of the groups or initiatives mentioned here, please contact Robby Hoffman, CJC General Secretary, for support robby@cjc.org.uk).

DON'T JUST CLOSE THIS BOOKLET

HERE IS A REMINDER OF WHAT WE CAN DO

- **CONTACT THE RELEVANT GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENT**
- **FIND OUT IN WHAT WAY YOUR GOVERNMENT IS CONTRIBUTING TO THE COMMONWEALTH'S BLUE CHARTER**
- **CONTACT OTHER RELIGIOUS GROUPS TO JOIN YOUR VOICE TO THEIRS ON THIS MATTER**
- **INVESTIGATE YOUR COUNTRY'S POLICY ON THE ACCEPTANCE OF ASYLUM SEEKERS AND REFUGEES**
- **ENCOURAGE YOUR GOVERNMENT TO DISCOVER WHETHER OR NOT IT COULD USE ISRAEL'S OUTSTANDING TECHNOLOGIES**
- **CONDUCT AN ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY SURVEY**
- **DEVELOP AN ELEMENT IN YOUR CHILDREN'S JEWISH EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMME**
- **CONDUCT A MITZVAH DAY PROJECT**
- **REVIEW YOUR OWN LIFESTYLE**
- **BE PREPARED TO CALL OUT ENVIRONMENTAL CARELESSNESS**



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