The window is closing for urgent climate change action in Pacific

By Ahmed Saeed, Vice-President of the Asian Development Bank

For the vast majority of us, last year was defined by the unanticipated calamity of COVID-19. But for those who live in the Pacific, a different misfortune—Cyclone Harold—unfortunately represented no great departure from the recent norm.

The Category 5 tropical cyclone that hit Fiji, Solomon Islands, Tonga, and Vanuatu claimed more than two dozen lives and caused tens of millions of dollars in damage.

Increasingly common—and increasingly more severe—natural disasters like Cyclone Harold are the plainest evidence we have of the escalating threat of climate change—and the particular vulnerability of the Pacific to it.

Countries in the Pacific sit on the frontlines of the impact of climate change, and the window for taking transformational action to build resilience against this threat is shrinking all the time. Put simply, the time to act is now, and the window for action is closing fast.

With the support of partners such as the United Nations, the United Kingdom, and Ireland—who established a Trust Fund in 2019 to build resilience in small island developing states (SIDS) like Solomon Islands—the Asian Development Bank is working closely with our Pacific developing member countries to prepare for climate change and help them build long-term climate-resilient development.

Under Strategy 2023, our new corporate vision, ADB will significantly increase our climate and disaster resilience related investments. ADB’s forthcoming Pacific Approach—which will guide ADB’s operations in the Pacific region over the next five years—will also focus on critical new priorities such as scaling-up engagement with the SIDS, addressing the underlying causes of vulnerability and fragility and improving access to geospatial climate and disaster risk information.

It is ADB’s mission to ensure that transformative adaptation is at the core of all infrastructure investments. This is the only way to reduce the impact of future shocks, to build resilience, and to avoid locking governments and communities into increased levels of risk.

ADB will continue to finance all of our investments in the Pacific. This is a bank-wide effort which began in 2016 and is already seeing progress in ADB-supported ports and wharves in Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu—all of which have been designed to cope with sea level rise and increased storm surge.

ADB is also engaged in integrating disaster risk reduction measures into national building codes. We plan to support this across the region and to work with partners to support enhanced regulatory and implementation capacity.

ADB will also place more emphasis on strengthening the knowledge, skills, and practices of government agencies.

Helping increase the institutional capacity of Pacific governments, especially on climate change and disaster risk management, is one of our most important goals and in many ways will be the most important legacy of our development work.

All of this will be costly, so we need more than just the ADB’s resources. Co-financing will be a large part of our work going forward, both from bilateral and multilateral partners.

We are eager to continue our efforts with the Green Climate Fund, for example, following on earlier success with the Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, and Tonga to mobilize an additional $18 million beyond ADB resources.

Development partners and Pacific governments alike need to work harder to integrate climate change into all aspects of our operations. It is a core development challenge and one that requires a “whole of government” response.

ADB and other international actors must do more to develop early warning systems and take anticipatory action to reduce the impact from climate-related disasters. Climate adaptation should be incorporated into strategic priorities and economic plans, as well as into the design of critical infrastructure and programs.

In this way, we can improve the lives of the poor people in the region, many of whom are the most vulnerable to disasters and climate risks. There can be no greater imperative, and no greater priority.

The challenges currently confronting the Pacific did not originate in this region, and neither can the solutions. The international community must do more. The window is closing soon, and the SIDS will be the earliest bellwethers of a process that might ultimately engulf us all.