# CLIMATE CHANGE IMPACT CASE STUDY: Kiribati

## SUMMARY

This case study explores the effects of climate change in Kiribati, including potential migration due to climate change impacts

## BACKGROUND

- Kiribati is located in the Micronesian region of the central Pacific Ocean and consists of 32 coral atolls, and one raised limestone island, 21 of which are inhabited (pop. 119,446 in 2020). (Chapman, et al., 2021 & Battles, 2021)
- These islands are broken into three major groups: the Gilbert Islands in the West, the central Phoenix Islands, and the Line Islands in the East. The islands have a total land area of roughly 811 square kilometers. The islands are largely spread apart and occupy an economic exclusion zone of roughly 3.6 million square kilometers. (Chapman, et al., 2021 & Battles, 2021)
- Kiribati's isolated low-lying atolls with highly concentrated population centers, make it one of the most vulnerable countries in the world. Its susceptibility is further compounded by the population's low socioeconomic composition. (Battles, 2021)

## CLIMATE CHANGE IMPACTS

- Kiribati faces potential threats from climate change including: "increased prevalence of heat wave and drought, intensified cyclones, saline intrusion, wave-driven flooding and permanent inundation." (Chapman et al., 2021)
- As with many parts of Oceania, sea-level rise is a existential threat to Kiribati
- Due to its geography, infrastructure is vulnerable to climate change effects. The coral atolls are low-lying, with a maximum elevation of 3 to 4 meters above sea level. (Chapman et al., 2021)
- The 2019 Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere by the IPCC estimates a potential rise in sea level of 1.1 meters by 2100, threatening to submerge over two-thirds of the country. (Henson et.al., 2020)
- Projected estimates indicate that some Pacific Island nations such as Kiribati may be uninhabitable by humans by 2050 due to climate change impacts. (IPCC)
- Kiribati has experienced internal migration to South Tarawa, where around 51 percent of the population live. (Chapman et al., 2021) However, due to poor economic circumstances compounded with environmental vulnerability, it is thought most future migrants may need to migrate externally.
- In 2014, the government purchased land from Fiji partly for potential relocation to house climate migrants (20 sq. km. on Vanua Levu). However, the purchase was controversial and support for relocation varies from administration to administration. (Henson, et al., 2020)

## CHALLENGES

- Kiribati is comprised of isolated and vulnerable low-lying atolls with concentrated population centers. Vulnerability is increased due to socioeconomic challenges
- Migration to South Tarawa is not sustainable economically. Most of the infrastructure is along the coast of the narrow island. With sea level rise, South Tarawa could become uninhabitable
- The current administration (2022) rejects the purchase of land from other countries
- According to a report from the World Bank Group, communities in Kiribati are likely to need support to adapt to and manage disaster risks. Geographic isolation and economic susceptibilities including a dependence on foreign aid and remittances, will increase challenges in the country. (Chapman et al., 2021)



Climate Change Effects in Island Nation of Kiribati. A view of mangrove shoots planted by Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon and others on Tarawa, an atoll in the Pacific island nation of Kiribati. Mr. Ban made an official visit to the area to discuss local people's concerns about the effects of climate change on this low-lying land.
**Source:** UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe. *https://flic.kr/p/arM7Ts*

# KEY POINTS

- Kiribati developed the National Framework for Climate Change Adaptation in 2013 which lays out the government's plan to respond to climate change through a five-part strategy. Part of the strategy includes migration. It aims to "reduce the vulnerability of Kiribati to increasing physical risks caused by climate change by establishing host country agreements to government sponsored and self-sponsored emigration to resettle I-Kiribati overseas and assist the inevitable migration of the population, due to climate change as and when this eventually arrives." (Battles, 2021)
- Over the past few years, Kiribati has experienced waves of internal migration to its capital, South Tarawa. Almost half of the population reside in this area and it continues to attract more migrants. South Tarawa faces many challenges, poverty being the most prominent. (Battles 2021)
- According to the Multidimensional Poverty Index from 2018/2019, roughly 20 percent of the population was classified as multidimensionally poor, meaning that around 23,000 experience multiple disadvantages simultaneously. While South Tarawa has provided an area for people to relocate, this is probably not sustainable as it is a narrow island and most of the infrastructure is along the coast which exposes the population to climate change impacts. The area could also eventually become uninhabitable due to sea-level rise. (Battles, 2021)
- As the purchase of land from Fiji in 2014 was contentious, the President at the time, Anote Tong, attempted to alleviate fears. He said that the purchase of the land in Fiji was said to be an investment in overseas property, partially for food security purposes, and, "as a last resort," to potentially be used as a place of resettlement for displaced. (Henson et al., 2020)
- In February of 2021, the Kiribati government began converting this land into a farm to instead provide food for its citizens in Kiribati. (Battles, 2021)
- While the current government in Kiribati rejects the 2014 purchase and criticizes its predecessor, other Pacific Island nations and international organizations are hoping for a thaw in relations between Kiribati and island nations promoting adaptation as well as migration. (Henson et al., 2020)
- Additionally, faith-based sentiments play a role, with many I-Kiribati reluctant to believe that God would allow the land to be taken away from them. (Henson et al., 2020)




The highest point in Sth Tarawa sign from sealevel. Erecting the 'Highest point sign' at Eita, the highest point in South Tarawa - just 3m above sea-level. This photo was taken from sea-level.
**Source:** Photo by 350.org. *https://flic.kr/p/8WWvsw*




Save us we are drowning. Banner from the rally of 200+ people at the start of the Tarawa Climate Change Conference
**Source:** Photo by 350.org. *https://flic.kr/p/8WWraY*

# SOURCES


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