

**Building Resilience in the Mascarene Islands: Why IORA's Disaster Risk Management
Agenda Matters**

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The southwest Indian Ocean is one of the most disaster-prone maritime regions in the world. Tropical cyclones, flooding, coastal erosion, and rising sea levels frequently threaten the islands and coastal states bordering this ocean basin. For the Mascarene Islands—comprising Mauritius, Réunion, and Rodrigues—disaster preparedness and resilience are therefore not abstract policy concerns but everyday realities. In this context, the growing emphasis on Disaster Risk Management (DRM) within the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) offers an important opportunity to strengthen regional cooperation and safeguard island communities. Disaster Risk Management is increasingly recognized as a multidisciplinary process involving governments, civil society, the private sector, and international organizations. Rather than focusing only on emergency response, DRM seeks to anticipate risks, reduce vulnerabilities, and improve the capacity of communities to recover from disasters. For island territories with small populations and limited land resources, such as those in the Mascarene region, these preventive measures are particularly important because even a single natural disaster can have far-reaching economic and social consequences.

The Mascarene Islands lie directly within the cyclone belt of the southwest Indian Ocean. Each year the region experiences powerful tropical storms that can damage infrastructure, disrupt economic activities, and threaten coastal ecosystems. Mauritius and Rodrigues have long histories of confronting severe cyclones that affect agriculture, fisheries, tourism, and transport networks. Even neighbouring Réunion, despite its advanced infrastructure and disaster response capacity, faces similar environmental risks. These shared vulnerabilities illustrate why regional cooperation in disaster management is essential. Natural hazards do not respect national borders, and effective responses often require coordinated action across countries. IORA provides an institutional platform for such cooperation by bringing together Indian Ocean states to exchange expertise, strengthen preparedness, and promote coordinated policies on disaster risk reduction.

Efforts within IORA are closely aligned with the principles of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction. Adopted by United Nations member states in 2015, the Sendai Framework

promotes a comprehensive approach to disaster risk reduction, emphasizing prevention, preparedness, and resilience. It encourages countries to adopt a multi-hazard approach that considers not only natural disasters but also climate-related and environmental risks. Crucially, the framework highlights the importance of regional and international cooperation in addressing these challenges. For Mauritius, aligning its national disaster risk management policies with the Sendai Framework and IORA initiatives strengthens its ability to respond to increasingly complex environmental threats. Over the years, Mauritius has developed effective cyclone monitoring systems, emergency shelters, and public awareness mechanisms. Yet the intensifying impacts of climate change—including stronger storms and rising sea levels—mean that continuous collaboration with regional partners remains essential.

A key development in this regard is the establishment of the Working Group on Disaster Risk Management (WGDRM) within IORA. This working group brings together disaster management experts, policymakers, and emergency response officials from across the region to coordinate strategies and promote knowledge sharing. By creating a structured mechanism for dialogue and cooperation, the group helps member states develop common approaches to disaster preparedness and recovery. For the Mascarene Islands, the benefits of such collaboration are significant. Regional cooperation can improve early warning systems, facilitate real-time information sharing on cyclone developments, and enhance the coordination of emergency responses. Access to regional data and monitoring systems allows authorities in Mauritius and Rodrigues to anticipate storms more accurately and implement protective measures before disasters strike.

Another important goal of the working group is the development of a collaborative regional framework for disaster risk management. This framework aims to integrate disaster risk reduction into national development strategies and strengthen institutional capacities among member states. For small island states, where economic sectors such as tourism, fisheries, and coastal infrastructure are highly exposed to environmental risks, mainstreaming disaster risk management into development planning is critical. Capacity building is also a central element of IORA's disaster management agenda. The Indian Ocean region hosts several internationally recognized research institutions and monitoring centres specializing in climate science, oceanography, and disaster forecasting. Through cooperation and information exchange, IORA enables countries such as Mauritius to benefit from regional expertise and technological advancements in disaster monitoring and preparedness.

Partnerships with international initiatives further enhance these efforts. One notable collaboration is IORA's partnership with the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI). This partnership focuses on strengthening infrastructure systems so they can withstand natural hazards and climate-

related risks. For island territories, where infrastructure such as ports, airports, and communication networks is essential for connectivity and economic stability, resilient infrastructure plays a crucial role in disaster preparedness. Beyond physical infrastructure, disaster resilience also depends on the preparedness of local communities. Public awareness campaigns, disaster education, and community-level planning can significantly reduce vulnerability during emergencies. In the Mascarene Islands, where coastal communities often depend on fishing, agriculture, and tourism, strengthening community resilience ensures that people are better equipped to respond to environmental shocks and rebuild their livelihoods afterward.

Ultimately, the challenges facing the Mascarene Islands reflect broader trends affecting the entire Indian Ocean region. Climate change, population growth, and environmental degradation are increasing the frequency and intensity of natural hazards. Addressing these challenges requires not only national preparedness but also strong regional cooperation. Through its disaster risk management initiatives, IORA offers an important platform for building that cooperation. By facilitating dialogue, knowledge sharing, and coordinated policies, the organisation helps member states develop more effective strategies for protecting their populations and economies from disasters. For Mauritius and the wider Mascarene region, active engagement with IORA's disaster risk management agenda can strengthen resilience and enhance long-term sustainability. In a region where the ocean connects societies as much as it exposes them to risk, cooperation remains the most effective pathway toward a safer and more resilient future.