

IORA and Climate Change as a Cross-Cutting Issue: Programs, Policy and Practice

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1st April 2026

The Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) is a key regional forum linking 23 states that border the Indian Ocean, from East Africa through South and Southeast Asia to Australasia. Founded in 1997 to deepen cooperation on shared interests, IORA has evolved to address not only trade and investment but also pressing environmental challenges, among which climate change stands out as a cross-cutting issue that spans economic, ecological, and human security dimensions.

Climate change in the Indian Ocean region is multi-layered. Sea level rise, increased extreme weather events, ocean warming, and acidification affect valuable marine ecosystems and human communities alike. For Small Island Developing States (SIDS) such as the Maldives and Seychelles, rising seas and coral bleaching threaten infrastructure and livelihoods dependent on tourism and fisheries. Coastal states in South and East Africa and South Asia face intensified cyclones and droughts with direct impacts on food security, disaster risk, and economic stability. These challenges cannot be understood in isolation; they intersect with trade, fisheries management, maritime security, sustainable development, and human well-being — all of which are central to IORA's mandate.

Because of this interconnectedness, IORA's strategic framework integrates climate change into its cross-cutting and priority agendas, rather than treating it as a separate environmental topic. One core avenue for this integration is the association's Blue Economy focus area. Formally introduced into the association's agenda in 2014, the Blue Economy initiative promotes sustainable ocean-based activities while safeguarding marine resources, with explicit recognition that climate change pressures — such as habitat degradation and extreme weather — undermine both ecosystems and economies if unaddressed.

The Blue Economy Working Group and related action plans reflect an understanding that climate resilience must be embedded alongside sustainable economic growth. Activities under this umbrella encompass fisheries and aquaculture, renewable ocean energy, marine biotechnology, and coastal resource management, all of which intersect with climate mitigation and adaptation goals. The

working group also promotes capacity building and knowledge exchange — essential when many member states face similar climate stressors. IORA has also developed more focused collaborative mechanisms. A prominent example is the IORA Blue Carbon Hub, a regionally coordinated effort to protect and restore “blue carbon” ecosystems such as mangroves, seagrasses, and saltmarshes — coastal habitats that sequester significant amounts of carbon while providing buffers against storm surges and erosion. The inaugural Blue Carbon Finance Think Tank, held in Mauritius in February 2020, brought together representatives from IORA member states to build knowledge and capacity on managing these ecosystems in ways that support both climate mitigation and local livelihoods.

This initiative illustrates how IORA bridges scientific research, policy frameworks, and practical implementation. By strengthening scientific cooperation and evidence-based policy, member states can align domestic climate strategies with regional priorities, reducing vulnerability while fostering sustainable economic opportunities such as eco-tourism or climate-smart fisheries. Another recent activity illustrating IORA’s practical engagement on climate-linked coastal management was the Regional Workshop on Marine Debris and Integrated Marine Debris Observing Systems, which engages members on pollution monitoring and ecosystem health — an issue exacerbated by climate-induced changes in ocean circulation and extreme weather. Events like these build technical capacity that, although not labeled strictly “climate change,” are critical to resilient environmental governance in a changing climate.

Beyond environmental programs, IORA’s climate mainstreaming is evident in its disaster risk management cooperation, a priority area directly linked to climate variability. Workshops and collaborative exercises under this thematic area address early warning systems, emergency response, and coastal planning — all of which reduce vulnerability to cyclones, flooding, and other climate-amplified hazards. Partnerships with external actors further amplify IORA’s capacity to address climate-related challenges. For instance, Germany’s GIZ project “Strengthening Capacities of IORA with a Focus on Climate Change as a Security Risk” (2017–2024) aimed to enhance institutional capacity within IORA on disaster risk management and the blue economy as they relate to climate and security threats. Such cooperation acknowledges that climate impacts extend into non-traditional security realms, including food security and migration pressures.

Similarly, recent seminars like the 6th Republic of Korea (ROK)-IORA Partnership Seminar on Marine Spatial Planning highlight how strategic planning tools are used to balance sustainable development, ecosystem conservation, and climate resilience in marine spaces. Marine spatial planning enables member states to allocate ocean uses in ways that minimise conflicts, protect biodiversity, and adapt to changing climatic conditions — blending ecological stewardship with

socio-economic goals. At the political level, forums such as the IORA Council of Ministers (COM) Meeting in May 2025, themed “Sustainable Indian Ocean for Future Generations,” reaffirm member states’ commitment to inclusive and sustainable development that encompasses climate resilience, maritime cooperation, and rule-based governance.

In sum, climate change is deeply embedded within IORA’s structure and activities as a cross-cutting issue. It is not siloed in an environmental cluster alone but woven into economic, social, and security agendas. From blue carbon protection and renewable energy cooperation to coastal disaster planning and policy dialogues, IORA fosters regional cooperation that acknowledges climate change’s pervasive impacts. This integrated approach is crucial in a region where environmental shifts reverberate across borders, economies, and communities. As IORA continues to evolve its strategies, climate change will likely remain a central challenge driving cooperation across sectors — underscoring the need for coordinated, science-based, and inclusive regional governance in the Indian Ocean.