

Rising sea levels in overseas territories: what strategies can be adopted to adapt?

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Rising sea levels are an inevitable phenomenon caused by climate change, the impacts of which are already visible. Over the past century, the average sea level has risen by more than 20 cm. Overseas territories are on the front line of rising sea levels: they alone account for more than 70% of France's coastline, and their development concentrated on coastal areas and the fragility of their ecosystems make them the French territories most exposed to rising sea levels.

The consequences of rising sea levels in overseas territories

In overseas territories, rising sea levels are already a reality. They exacerbate the consequences of natural events that are already well advanced, such as coastal erosion. Added to this are extreme weather events caused by global warming: cyclones, storms, hurricanes, droughts and intense rainfall, the cumulative effects of which are devastating.

The consequences are very real, as in the commune of Le Prêcheur in Martinique, where waves have destroyed the rockfill erected to protect homes, or in Anse Belleville, where the coastline has been receded by more than 130 metres in 60 years, requiring a retreat and relocation process. The village of Miquelon is already being relocated, the first case of climate refugees in France. In French Guiana, river regions are experiencing inland flooding due to increasingly frequent overflowing of Amazonian rivers.

Territories already mobilised and offering solutions

Overseas territories are now suffering the consequences of global warming, to which they have contributed very little. The priority now is to adapt. Nature-based solutions should be prioritised because they protect coastlines and delay the effects of rising sea levels. This includes restoring natural mangrove areas, sandy ecosystems, seagrass beds and wetlands, and preserving coral reefs. These nature-based solutions give public authorities valuable time to implement adaptation strategies and enable local communities to participate in projects in their own areas.



97 %

of French maritime territory is located overseas

In preparing this opinion, the delegation drew on contributions from the overseas Regional Economic, Social and Environmental Councils (CESERs). It also conducted a questionnaire survey of 120 overseas companies on their perception of the risks associated with rising sea levels in their territories.

What measures can be taken to adapt to rising sea levels in overseas territories?

The ESEC is drawing up an inventory for each overseas territory and presenting the solutions currently available to them, along with their limitations. Finally, it is identifying the changes that are essential in order to best organise adaptation to rising sea levels, which will affect the entire population.

1 Ensuring financing and insurability

The financial stakes associated with rising sea levels are significant. On the one hand, there is the issue of insurability, as rising sea levels are characterised by phenomena that are classified as natural hazards (e.g. coastal flooding and inland flooding), which can only be partially compensated and insured, and others that are not classified as such, such as coastal erosion. On the other hand, financing tools such as the Climate Fund, the Green Fund and the Barrier Fund are not designed or calibrated to support adaptation policies, particularly in the context of coastal erosion.

→ What does the ESEC recommend?

Integrate adaptation policies, with priority for overseas territories, into current and future mitigation financing instruments.

2 Organising territorial adaptation policies

Faced with the human challenges posed by rising sea levels, many stakeholders are working to improve assessment and planning (scientists, experts, government departments, local authorities). The complexity of the issue and of existing mechanisms is a real challenge for overseas local authorities and leads to a loss of efficiency. Furthermore, national climate change adaptation strategies are designed primarily from a 'continental' perspective of coastal risks and are not

sufficiently adapted to overseas island territories.

→ What does the ESEC recommend?

Establish a single point of contact in each prefecture to facilitate the work of elected officials and coordinate adaptation to rising sea levels.

Provide specific strategies for each overseas territory in the National Climate Change Adaptation Plan. Revise all planning and urban development documents in overseas territories to include the risks associated with rising sea levels, in particular the non-buildability of coastal areas and the relocation of infrastructure away from flood-prone areas.

3 Mobilising and raising awareness: we all have a role to play

Awareness of the risks associated with rising sea levels among the general public and businesses is still uneven. Sea level rise may seem like a distant phenomenon. Adaptation policies must be understood by everyone in order to reassure and engage people in the adaptation process.

→ What does the CESE recommend?

Raise awareness among schoolchildren of the risks associated with rising sea levels by appointing eco-delegates in all classes, organising 'youth COPs' in each school and systematically establishing marine educational areas. Mobilise business networks and involve the Social and Economic Committee (OSE) in raising awareness and preventing the risks associated with rising sea levels. Organise thematic 'regional COPs' and involve the CESERS.

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