



Charting Caribbean Sustainable Development

Caribbean Policy Development Centre

Outcome Statement

Regional Policy Meeting

Barbados

October 8 - 10, 2024

The Caribbean Policy Development Centre held its Regional Policy Meeting in Barbados, October 8 – 10, 2024 under the theme “*Forging Ahead: Charting Caribbean Sustainable Development*”. The meeting brought together individuals and organisations from across the Caribbean region and beyond, with the aim of re-imagining and creating a paradigm shift in sustainable development for the region.

The meeting underscored the severe impact of climate change on the region’s economies. The ten (10) most intense hurricanes in the Caribbean region, the average increase in debt is about 10% (Cavallo et al., 2024)¹. Three years after a hurricane, debt levels are 18% higher than what would have been expected otherwise (Cavallo et al., 2024)². The region’s ability therefore, to respond to climate change variability and change is restricted by the limited fiscal space and unsustainable sovereign debt. Given the region’s reliance on natural resources related to the agriculture, fisheries and tourism sectors, engaging international financial institutions is essential. This will help secure sustainable financial arrangements to address climate change impacts on social and economic development, which are based on fairer engagement terms.

The Regional Policy Meeting addressed key issues and initiatives at multiple levels, focusing on development, social justice and solutions. Across three (3) days and six (6) sessions, participants tackled pivotal issues facing Caribbean countries in the advent of climate change.

The meeting critically examined society, the economy and the environment, amid rising sovereign debt, poverty and weak social protection systems. These discussions occur at a critical time for regional and global social justice discourse. Ahead of COP29 in Azerbaijan, it offers key insights for Caribbean NGOs and CSOs, and follows the Summit of the Future in New York, Climate Week and the UN General Assembly.

1. Governance

¹ Cavallo, E. A., Gómez, S., Noy, I., & Strobl, E. (2024). Climate Change, Hurricanes, and Sovereign Debt in the Caribbean Basin. IDB Publications.

² Ibid

Regional governance requires robust frameworks and regulations for inclusive participation of public, private, non-governmental organisation (NGO) and civil society organisation (CSO) actors in policymaking.

Non-governmental organisations and civil society must assume a vital role at the grass-roots level, while investing in capacity building, including policy analysis and negotiation. This will enable meaningful participation in budget planning and policy formulation, thereby leading to stronger outcomes.

Governance models must ensure transparency and accountability, moving away from colonial legacies and towards a Caribbean cultural identity. A fully effective Bridgetown Initiative needs strong supportive and implementation frameworks to track and account for financial flows. We must develop unique models to support international engagement.

We support the call for the implementation of tools and legislation (domestic and international) to ensure responsible financing, debt management and transparency.

Key Consensus Areas

- a. **Adopt an adaptive governance model** that ensures full and equal participation of the public sector, private sector, unions, non-governmental organisations and civil society in regional leadership and decision-making processes, and includes safeguards to protect policymaking processes from conflicts of interest and undue influence by actors with vested commercial and other interests.
- b. **Strengthen regional institutions and frameworks** to integrate indigenous knowledge and technologies that have proven successful in supporting localised growth across Caribbean countries.
- c. **Create mechanisms for inclusive participation** that allow local communities, vulnerable groups, NGOs, and CSOs to fully contribute to, and drive policy formation and implementation.
- d. **Enhance the legislative environment** to promote transparency, accountability and public confidence, through measures such as Freedom of Information, Integrity in Public Office and Conflict-of-interest legislation that cannot easily be circumvented.

2. Food and Nutrition Security, Sovereignty and Healthy Diets

Generally, the region imports more food than it produces, while import tariffs seem to favour high-calorie, low-nutrient food which lead to poor diets, with such consequences as antimicrobial resistance and increased levels of non-communicable Diseases (NCDs) throughout the CARICOM region. Within the region, transportation systems impact the cost of trade and at times pose limitations, especially where perishable, more nutritious food choices are concerned. Addressing NCDs require a whole-of-economy, government and societal response.

The private sector's role in the food supply chain management and logistics from production to distribution to disposal is crucial, and policies and tax regimes must

ensure that production and trade in healthier food choices are more affordable, accessible, equitable and sustainable.

The region must collectively:

- **Reduce food imports by 25% by 2030** through increased local production and fostering agricultural entrepreneurship, by improving financing for production and agro-processing in the farming and fishing sectors; and reducing the importation of ultra-processed food products.
- **Elevate the role of small farmers as primary food producers** by providing training, market access and financial support for capital investments.
- **Increase food production** through the development and enforcement of legislation and regulations for zoning and land use for agricultural development and value-added production.
- **Promote diversified agricultural and fisheries production**, supporting small farmers with training in climate-resilient technologies, both new and indigenous, to enhance yields.
- Develop mechanisms including policies and marketing and sales channels to **connect local farmers and producers directly with hotels, restaurants, food establishments and the public service including schools**, to promote the use of local produce.
- **Introduce evidence-informed front-of-package nutrition labelling** to influence and empower consumers to choose healthier food options low in sugar, sodium and fats.
- **Advocate for fairer global trade policies** that consider the challenges of small economies and Small Island Developing States (SIDS),
- **Create a regional bio-medical industry through funding of research and development** through regional colleges of medicine (UWI, Ross, etc.) to promote the use of traditional medicinal plants, such as medical marijuana, fever grass and the Panadol plant.

3. Regional Integration

The CARICOM Single Market and Economy (CSME) was implemented to foster regional integration among member states by facilitating the free movement of goods, services, capital and people. This initiative aims to establish a competitive and cohesive economic environment that enables Caribbean nations to tackle challenges such as economic vulnerability, high unemployment and limited market access.

The free movement of people is crucial for the effective implementation of CSME and the region's development. Allowing individuals to work, live and travel across member states is critical to our long-term development. However, challenges, including regulatory barriers, inconsistent custom procedures and tariffs, socio-economic disparities, public perception and fears around job security and cultural dilution hinder free movement of goods and people. This is compounded by inadequate transportation and communication infrastructure. The COVID-19 pandemic has further exposed these vulnerabilities, underscoring the need for health protocols alongside the call for increased mobility within the region.

The region has been waiting and it is time to make regional integration work for us by:

- **Engaging the region's population** on the benefits of leveraging collective strengths and advancing regional integration.
- **Re-engaging CARICOM member states** and offering incentives for the timely, reciprocal implementation of regulatory frameworks that facilitate the free movement of goods, services, people and capital, with a focus on equity and inclusion for vulnerable and marginalised groups.
- **Strengthening harmonised policies** to create a regional single market space, foster investment, increase competitiveness, reduce reliance on international financial instruments (IFIs) and address the import-to-export imbalance that limits economic capacity.
- **Investing in infrastructure and communications networks** to support intra-regional trade; and ensure free, safe and inclusive movement across the region.

4. Climate Change and Building Resilience

Annually, our region is faced with the Atlantic hurricane season from June to November. As we deal with the impact of climate variability and change, the region is expected to see more intense rainfall and stronger hurricanes. While all of us are impacted by climatic events, there are some vulnerable groups that are more severely affected and affected. These groups face unique challenges and require targeted support to build resilience against the ongoing and future impacts of climate change. The intensified focus on climate comes alongside increasing and persistent ambient air and sea temperatures, as well as more frequent heatwaves. 2024 has set many records for temperature across the world and the excessive heat has been persistent in the Caribbean since March 2024³. These realities have wide-ranging implications for energy particularly cooling, for agricultural productivity, for the coastal and marine ecosystems upon which our economies depend, for human health and wellbeing, as well as for national budgetary allocations and inflation. There are also implications for the following:

- **Coastal Communities:** Many Caribbean islands have large populations living along the coastlines. These communities face threats from rising sea levels, coastal erosion and stronger storms.
- **Small Farmers:** Climate change has created new challenges for small farmers, who are crucial for maintaining food and nutrition security. They are affected by changes in precipitation patterns, increased frequency of extreme weather events and rising temperatures.
- **Women and Girls:** Women and girls often endure the worst of climate change impacts due to existing social inequalities. They are more likely to be affected by disruptions in agriculture, water scarcity and health issues. Women and girls are also more susceptible to sexual violence in shelters.
- **Indigenous People:** Indigenous communities, which often rely on natural resources for their livelihoods, are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change such as changes in biodiversity and ecosystem services.

³ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2024/09/summer-2024-hottest-on-record-nature-climate-news/>

- **Tourism-dependent Populations:** Many Caribbean economies rely heavily on tourism, which is threatened by climate change as a result of damage to infrastructure, beaches and natural attractions.

Key Consensus Areas

- a. **Design and expand access to effective early warning systems (EWS)** that takes into account the nuances of local language and culture, while ensuring adequate technology for transmission of messages.
- b. **Promote and mobilise around a comprehensive regional education programme** that builds awareness and advances the use of mangroves and other crops that reduce soil erosion and filter waterways.
- c. **Advocate for, and integrate gender transformative targets and indicators; and apply gender responsive climate budgeting principles** in post-disaster recovery and building back better interventions.
- d. **Allocate resources in domestic budgets for, and prioritise socially adaptive and long-term climate responsive and resilience-building initiatives** via Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), National Adaptation Plans (NAPs) and in proposals to the Green Climate Fund, the Global Environment Facility and the Adaptation Fund.
- e. **Improve direct investment and multi-sectoral partnerships** in climate resilient infrastructure by implementing robust policies that address, amongst others, adequate drainage systems for both residential and commercial development and making use of water harvesting and solar power generation from rooftops.
- f. **Increase national budgets for social protection programmes**, including programmes to address gender-based violence (GBV) and sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment (SEAH), through reallocation of revenue from **citizenship by investment programmes and taxes from tourism sectors**.
- g. **Increase budgetary allocations to support small and medium-scale farmers**, to adopt climate-smart technologies and systems through domestic, regional and international public finance, as well as other sources.
- h. **Engage insurance providers and risk managers in the development of climate and disaster insurance** to support recovery and rebuilding.
- i. **Provide low-interest loans, grants or subsidies** to help farmers invest in climate smart technologies and practices.
- j. **Provide training in climate-smart technology** by strengthening extension services to offer on-the-ground support and services; and **invest in research and development**, along with maintaining an efficient system for distribution of climate resilient crop varieties.
- k. **Create a platform for the inclusion of faith-based organisations**, in advocating for policies and actions that promote debt forgiveness, investment in renewable energy and mitigate the impact of climate change.

5. Restorative and Reparatory Justice

Restorative and reparatory justice in the context of the Caribbean Small Island Developing States (SIDS) focuses on addressing the historical injustices and ongoing impacts of colonialism, slavery and exploitation. The justice our region seeks goes further by seeking tangible compensation and systemic changes to rectify historical wrongs.

Key Aspects of Restorative and Reparatory Justice

- Seeking monetary reparations for the descendants of enslaved and exploited peoples.
- Advocating for changes in policies and institutions that perpetuate inequality and discrimination.
- Implementing initiatives to improve the socioeconomic conditions of vulnerable communities.

Ensuring restorative and reparatory justice in the Caribbean would require governance reform and financial strategies that will serve to:

- **Enact laws recognising historical injustices and support civil society-led reparatory initiatives** related to awareness building, global lobbying and reparations negotiations, and ensuring a collective bargaining approach.
- **Create a regional reparations sustainable development fund** to finance investments in renewable energy, eco-tourism and sustainable agriculture, three critical and interlinked areas of regional long-term development.
- **Implement transparent and decentralised mechanisms** for the allocation and use of reparation funds to finance climate mitigation, health, education and social protection programmes at the national level.
- **Establish a regional human capital development fund** to support education, literacy, knowledge generation and sharing, as well as training in STEM, research, and innovation and technology development.

6. Alternative Financial Models for Regional Development

Caribbean Small Island Developing States (SIDS) struggle within a global financial structure ill-suited to their needs, facing difficult choices and significant economic challenges, primarily due to high sovereign debt and increasing borrowing cost.

Total external debt has surpassed US\$30 billion, with nearly half owed to private creditors for whom few rules exist to shape terms. Alarming, six (6) Caribbean SIDS rank amongst the top ten(10) most heavily indebted SIDS worldwide, with public debt stocks exceeding 80% of GDP. This heavy debt burden restricts investment in critical areas such as climate resilience, education and healthcare, while social protection expenditure remains low, typically under 5% of GDP despite an increasing social fragility and insecurity.

New financial models for development must integrate indigenous instruments and regional approaches for greater efficiency. The CARICOM Reparations Commission (CRC) Ten-Point Plan for Reparatory Justice, demanding repatriation and debt cancellation, can guide these models to better track financial flows. As momentum crystallises around reparatory justice for colonialism and climate change, a few standout needs emerge:

- **Acknowledge and formalise indigenous financial arrangements** like ‘sou-sou’, ‘meeting’ or box hand as mechanisms for securing interest-free loans for MSME

start-ups, promoting entrepreneurship and expanding risk-pooling opportunities for those vulnerable to economic and environmental shocks.

- **Revitalise reparations talks** to create a financing model that supports regional climate resilience, adaptation funding and insurance, while investing in social organisation and building social capital.
- **Enhance access to development financing** from IFIs that reflect the realities of Small Island Developing States, emphasising the need for concessionary development funding and fairer terms of engagement.

7. An Enabling Environment for NGO and CSO Participation

Enacting all of the above is not, nor can it be, business as usual for Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs) and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs). NGOs and CSOs emanate from grass-roots responses to community needs. Largely fuelled by the passion of an individuals, groups and communities, they expand and retract over time. NGOs and CSOs largely support social development, by filling gaps in public sector social protection services and organise to ensure visibility of those less visible and sometimes, less socially included.

Unsurprisingly, Caribbean NGOs and CSOs encounter several financial and legal challenges that affect participation in regional development. These include but are not limited to:

- Limited funding and access to finance (for administrative costs, auditing and unrestricted funding).
- Maintaining legitimacy in the advent of political pressure.
- Stringent registration procedures.
- Lack of legal and financial instruments of operation that may require the approval of politicians.
- Limited legal recognition and inadequate legal status.
- Limited technical capacity.
- Weak governance structures.

To harness the value of good models for community engagement and action that have been the hallmark of NGO and CSO success, it is time to:

- **Create a supportive legislative environment** for NGOs and CSOs, including transparent, politically independent legal registration and tax incentives. This can involve **developing harmonised regulatory and legal frameworks**, to facilitate NGO and CSO operations across multiple territories, particularly on socially and politically sensitive issues.
- **Recognise NGOs and CSOs as key agents in social development** by acknowledging their legal status as representative voices in policy development, project implementation and national decision-making.
- **Develop a framework to measure the contributions of NGOs and CSOs to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) across the region**, providing key insights into their impact on social development.
- **Enhance NGO and CSO access to policy-making spaces** to ensure meaningful contribution to policy development and decision-making processes, and to encourage more meaningful representation of society.

- **Utilise indigenous financial mechanisms** to establish interest-free capital funding pools for NGOs, CSOs and other grassroots movements.
- **Leverage regional diaspora communities** to build symbiotic relationships in mobilising financial, technical and voluntary support for NGOs and CSOs.
- **Take up the spaces available to NGOs and CSOs**, particularly at the regional level, and create spaces where NGO and CSO voices are needed.

Conclusion

True sustainable development in the Caribbean, requires moving beyond traditional and colonialist models. Inclusivity, centering Caribbean citizens in the policymaking process (peopling), ensures that strategies reflect the realities and needs of the region. Development must emerge from a collective process that empowers communities and individuals to shape the policies that directly affect their lives. This goes hand in hand with civic participation.

Understanding the interconnectedness of the region's challenges is also crucial. Issues such as governance, development models, food insecurity, financing and sovereign debt are deeply intertwined with climate change. These challenges create a cycle of negative feedback, where one issue exacerbates the others. For instance, sovereign debt undermines food insecurity and climate action policies, while insufficient climate action worsens debt, perpetuating a destructive cycle.

In fostering a dynamic, flexible, alternative and sustainable development model therefore, we must prioritise local knowledge, embrace innovation, and advocate for policies that balance economic growth with environmental protection and social equity. This requires rethinking governance and governance systems in terms of who and how they serve. It requires us to ensure that economic decisions promote resilience rather than deepening vulnerability, and that decision-makers are held to account on critical issues like food security and sovereign debt within the context of climate change.

To thrive, the Caribbean needs inclusive, people-centered sustainable development. Engaging all stakeholders—particularly marginalised groups, and focusing on gender responsive resilient development innovations, can break the cycles of underdevelopment and vulnerability. This path promises a future of shared prosperity and environmental stewardship, where the Caribbean can fully harness its potential, while ensuring a sustainable future for generations to come.



Caribbean Policy Development Centre

The Caribbean Policy Development Centre (CPDC) is a non-profit organisation headquartered in Barbados. As a regional umbrella non-governmental organisation (NGO), CPDC represents a diverse coalition of organisations across CARICOM, including small farmers, migrant communities, women's groups, youth organisations, indigenous people, rural populations and faith-based organisations. The CPDC's mission is to amplify the voices of Caribbean citizens, particularly those from marginalised communities.

Through grassroots engagement and advocacy at regional and international levels, CPDC works to ensure that the perspectives of these marginalised communities are heard in policymaking arenas. The organisation has made significant impacts by providing small-scale financing to non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community-based organisations (CBOs), supporting initiatives that enhance representation and promote rights-based approaches to development.

The CPDC focuses on empowering civil society, improving policy understanding and advocating for targeted policies that address the needs of its members. Its activities include research, training, advocacy, the development of educational resources and institutional strengthening, among other activities.

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