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ADVANCING THE DECADE OF ACTION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN THE CARIBBEAN

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ABOUT ECLAC/CDCC

The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) is one of five regional commissions of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). It was established in 1948 to support Latin American governments in the economic and social development of that region. Subsequently, in 1966, the Commission (ECLA, at that time) established the subregional headquarters for the Caribbean in Port of Spain to serve all countries of the insular Caribbean, as well as Belize, Guyana and Suriname, making it the largest United Nations body in the subregion.

At its sixteenth session in 1975, the Commission agreed to create the Caribbean Development and Cooperation Committee (CDCC) as a permanent subsidiary body, which would function within the ECLA structure to promote development cooperation among Caribbean countries. Secretariat services to the CDCC would be provided by the subregional headquarters for the Caribbean. Nine years later, the Commission's widened role was officially acknowledged when the Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA) modified its title to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC).

Key Areas of Activity

The ECLAC subregional headquarters for the Caribbean (ECLAC/CDCC secretariat) functions as a subregional think-tank and facilitates increased contact and cooperation among its membership. Complementing the ECLAC/CDCC work programme framework, are the broader directives issued by the United Nations General Assembly when in session, which constitute the Organisation's mandate. At present, the overarching articulation of this mandate is the Millenium Declaration, which outlines the Millenium Development Goals.

Towards meeting these objectives, the Secretariat conducts research; provides technical advice to governments, upon request; organizes intergovernmental and expert group meetings; helps to formulate and articulate a regional perspective within global forums; and introduces global concerns at the regional and subregional levels.

Areas of specialization include trade, statistics, social development, science and technology, and sustainable development, while actual operational activities extend to economic and development planning, demography, economic surveys, assessment of the socio-economic impacts of natural disasters, climate change, data collection and analysis, training, and assistance with the management of national economies.

The ECLAC subregional headquarters for the Caribbean also functions as the Secretariat for coordinating the implementation of the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States. The scope of ECLAC/CDCC activities is documented in the wide range of publications produced by the subregional headquarters in Port of Spain.

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DIRECTOR'S DESK:

TIME TO ACT: ADVANCING THE DECADE OF ACTION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN THE CARIBBEAN

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have come to define the new global platform for development. With one-third of the timeframe set for achievement of the SDGs already expired, world leaders at the SDG Summit in September 2019 called for the 2020s to be designated as the Decade of Action and delivery for sustainable development. This was backed by a pledge to mobilize financing, enhance national implementation and strengthen institutions towards the achievement of the 17 Goals by 2030

The advent of the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) as a pandemic earlier this year, however, has seriously undermined progress towards the achievement of the SDGs, with reversal already discernible in the attainment of specific SDG targets. The economic fallout of lockdowns; the learning loss from school shutdowns; the social and emotional toll of physical distancing in addition to the loss of lives and ill health of many citizens brought by COVID-19 and its impacts have all had significant adverse effect on the progress made towards achieving the SDGs in the last five years.

In the Caribbean, COVID-19 has further aggravated the vulnerabilities of the countries of the subregion. At a time when Caribbean small island developing States (SIDS) are grappling with high public debt and increasingly limited fiscal space, governments have been forced to invest in extra budgetary activities to manage the spread of COVID-19 and to address its related socioeconomic impacts. The urgency of the COVID-19 response measures and the prioritization of public expenditure to support these measures have immediate and medium-term implications for SDG implementation. At the same time, the longer it takes for the economies to return to full functionality, the greater the fiscal deficit that countries will be forced to carry. As of 2019, 10 Caribbean countries were already considered to be shouldering an unsustainable level of public debt, with liquidity crises in real danger of becoming issues of solvency. Accelerating the implementation of the SDGs in this decade of action will, therefore, require access to innovative and purposeful long-term, low-cost development funding. This should include leveraging domestic, private sector funds as well as the knowledge base and capacities of the civil society as in-kind contributions towards advancing the SDGs.

The experience of Caribbean countries with COVID-19 has underscored the importance and timeliness of the promise of the 2030 Agenda to leave no one behind. It has shown that while hunger had hitherto not been a major concern of most households, a shock the magnitude of COVID-19 could - without warning - throw families into circumstances of serious food insecurity. With respect to education, most schools, of necessity, have moved to online or hybrid modes of teaching. Considering the digital access gap between the rich and poor and the urban and rural, virtual schooling precipitated by COVID-19 threatens to increase inequality in access to education, exacerbating the gap in educational attainment and skills of the future work force based on their socioeconomic status or geographical location. This not only repudiates the UN's commitment to leave no one behind, it would also directly hinder the attainment of SDG4 on access to quality education and SDG10 on reducing inequalities, among others. It would also increase the challenge of limited capacity faced by Caribbean SIDS, a major obstacle to the advancement of sustainable development in the subregion. These issues are indicative, not exhaustive descriptors of the emerging challenge that COVID-19 presents as the Caribbean prepares to accelerate SDG implementation during this decade of action.

This edition of the FOCUS magazine addresses the issue of financing for sustainable development in the Caribbean in the context of COVID-19. This challenge is situated within the context of the Caribbean SIDS' classification as middle- and upper-income countries and the implications which attach with respect to their access to concessional financial assistance, despite their high vulnerability to the impact of exogenous climatic and economic factors and the unsustainable levels of public debt they carry, stifling growth and limiting indigenous capacity to build resilience. Articles will throw light on the impact that COVID-19 has had on education in the subregion. Another article gives attention to those areas where equality is lagging in the Caribbean, including in income, housing, and access to land, spotlighting the adverse impact that COVID-19 has had on Caribbean citizens, using these important indicators of economic and social inequality. This edition also includes an article on the need to form engaged partnerships with civil society organizations so as to foster a whole-of-society approach towards achievement of the SDGs.

As we begin the journey through this Decade of Action, I invite you to consider critically the issues that we have raised in this edition of the FOCUS magazine and challenge you to make your contribution, however big or small, towards ensuring that the SDGs are achieved in the Caribbean by the year 2030.

Yours in Focus

Diane Quarless

FINANCING FOR CARIBBEAN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Dillon Alleyne *

"It takes cash to care" - Edward Seaga, Former Prime Minister of Jamaica.

Financing sustainable development is a major challenge for small island developing states (SIDS) that has been articulated since the Barbados Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of SIDS.[1] This is even more evident in light of the economic and social disruptions that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused. Among these are border closures, the implementing of social distancing and the disruption of global supply chains.

With respect to the Caribbean, COVID-19 represents yet another challenge which directly impacts the capacity of the subregion to address its sustainable development priorities, including such mandates as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the SIDS Accelerated Modalities of Action (SAMOA Pathway). Specifically, the article examines how the middle- and high-income status of countries of the subregion affects their access to much needed concessional finance and urges the use of vulnerability indices to determine such access by Caribbean countries. It also explores the challenges posed by high debt and low economic growth and the role that domestic and international capital sources of financing can play in addressing the financing gap.

THE MIDDLE INCOME QUESTION

Most Caribbean countries are categorized as middle-, upper-middle, or high-income countries based on their per capita income.

The subregion, and the SIDS group in general, have long argued that this is an inappropriate categorization that does not consider the extreme vulnerabilities of these countries to natural disasters, climate change and negative external shocks. However, because of this categorization, the Caribbean has seen a declining contribution of Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) to promote its sustainable development. The implication of this is that most of the development finance must be accessed on commercial terms. In addition, there is limited opportunity to access global financial bond markets due to their relatively small demand and associated elevated sovereign risks.[2]

The vulnerability of the subregion is well-documented. It is estimated that Caribbean SIDS suffer at least US$3 billion every year in damage and losses from hurricane impacts alone. ECLAC estimated that in 2017, the passage of hurricanes Irma and Maria caused some US $5.4 billion worth of damages and losses, and most of the financing for rebuilding had to be sourced from domestic and international sources at commercial terms (Caribbean Outlook, 2020). More recently, Hurricane Dorian affected many countries, but the most affected was the Bahamas, with estimated damages and losses of US $2.5 billion and US $717.3 million respectively. The total cost of Hurricane Dorian was approximately US $3.4 billion or 1 per cent of the GDP of the Bahamas.

Building back better after each disaster adds to the debt burden, leading to a significant portion of government revenue being diverted from development projects to debt service payments. Caribbean governments have argued that an index of vulnerability is a true measure of their country's capacity to access finance and such an index would help the subregion to garner much needed concessional resources.[3]

THE DEBT AND GROWTH NEXUS

No discussion of financing for sustainable development in the Caribbean can be meaningful without a discussion of the current debt crisis facing the subregion in a context of low economic growth.

Since the global financial crisis of 2008-2009, growth rates for most countries have not returned to pre-crisis levels. This has been partly due to the difficult international climate for growth and also to the high debt burden which has accumulated over time. Just before the COVID-19 crisis many tourism-based economies were improving their growth rates, mostly due to the expansion of the United States economy, while commodity producers were facing low energy prices. This is illustrated in Figure 1 below. The left panel shows the decline in growth and the significant debt overhang while the right panel shows the composition of public debt, which suggests that the debt structure among Caribbean countries is heterogenous.

Several countries in the Caribbean have had to seek IMF support and have

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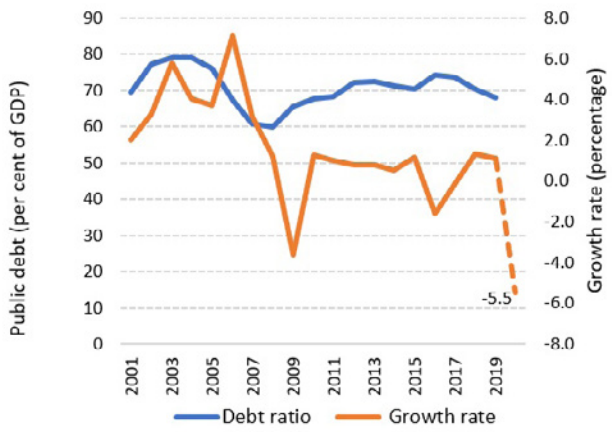
[1] United Nations General Assembly A/CONF.167/9.

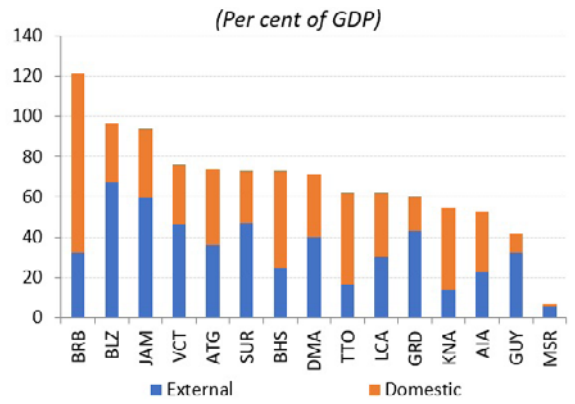
[2] ECLAC, Capital Flows to Latin America and the Caribbean. Washington, D.C., May 2020

[3] The United Nations has already developed such an index but this has not yet gained acceptance among the Bretton Wood financial institutions.

Figure 1: GDP growth and public debt



Total Public Debt, 2019



Source: ECLAC, a case for resilience building, 2020

had multiple restructuring of their debt. Nonetheless, total public debt has remained high. At the same time, low growth has been accompanied by increasing public aspirations, especially in light of the SDGs. The prospects for the near term, especially for countries relying on tourism markets, are not optimistic.

COVID-19 will result in a significant loss in tourist expenditure and foreign exchange, owing to the closure of the industry. The loss will result in a dramatic fall in service exports and in the GDP growth rate. Given the uncertainty regarding the progress of COVID-19, ECLAC has estimated three different scenarios for growth, a base scenario, an optimistic and a pessimistic one.[4]

The GDP growth rates in 2020 will be -6.1 percentage points in the optimistic scenario, -7.5 in the base scenario and -8.0 in the pessimistic scenario. The concomitant loss of visitor exports will be 33.6 per cent, 40.8 per cent and 43.3 per cent in the three scenarios respectively.

Across the subregion, the total expected loss in visitor expenditure from both stayover and cruise arrivals will be US $22 billion in the optimistic scenario, US $26.7 billion in the base scenario and US $28.3 billion in the pessimistic scenario.

The negative impact on the sector will be manifested in reduced earnings by hotels, taxi drivers and craft vendors, plus lower purchases from the commerce, distribution and agriculture sectors (ECLAC, A case for resilience building).[5] This will severely dampen the earnings and livelihoods of small business owners and workers in these sectors. Job losses in this sector will disproportionately affect women since on average in the Caribbean 10.5 per cent of the female labour force works in accommodation and food service, compared to 4.6 per cent for males. (ECLAC, A case for resilience building). Increasing growth and reducing debt will be critical in the next few years as the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed many areas of inequality in the Caribbean. The most glaring relates to education services, since many households did not have access to adequate ICT infrastructure at the beginning of the pandemic. Novel ways were employed to address this digital gap, but many children are still being left behind. As a resilience building strategy, a broadband infrastructure will have to be deployed across the Caribbean to improve interconnection across all sectors. Such a framework will also be useful for supporting disaster risk reduction strategies. But this kind of sustainable infrastructure will require considerable financing - mostly from governments - either utilizing existing Universal Service Funds or increased borrowing. Much of the financing efforts to reduce the impact of COVID-19 has been sourced through reorienting existing budgetary flows and increased borrowing. For example, of the US $1.2 billion spent thus far in the Caribbean, more than 50 per cent has been sourced through additional borrowing.

► (continued on page 6)

[4] nOptimistic: Assumes the "lockdown" period of near zero arrivals continues until June 2020. Most countries get the pandemic under control and from July arrivals gradually return to the 70% of the level forecasted at baseline over a period of nine months.
Base: Assumes the "lockdown" period of near zero arrivals continues until September 2020. Most countries get the pandemic under control and from October, arrivals gradually return to 60% of the level forecasted at baseline over a period of nine months.
Pessimistic: Assumes the "lockdown" measures are lifted in September, but countries have not gotten the pandemic under control. This opening would be followed by a second wave of infections, intensified by falling temperatures in the Northern Hemisphere. Travel restrictions are then re-implemented and last until December 2020. Beginning in January, arrivals gradually return to 50% of the level forecasted at baseline over a period of nine months (ECLAC, a case for resilience building).
[5] CECLAC, A Case for Resilience Building 2020 (unpublished).

▸ (continued from page 5)

FINANCING FOR CARIBBEAN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC *(CONTINUED)*

DOMESTIC CAPITAL MARKETS

The Addis Ababa FFD Action Agenda recognizes that while not all the financing for development can be sourced from domestic sources, the domestic finance, including that from the private sector, is important. That Agenda emphasized such innovative approaches as blended finance in which ODA can be blended with private capital inflows including foreign direct investment (FDI). With no access to significant ODA, this is not a realistic option for the Caribbean.

The domestic banking sector in the Caribbean is dominated by the commercial banks. Capital markets are very thin and there is considerable risk aversion by the private banking sector, unless returns can be guaranteed. The use of public private partnerships remains a viable option, especially for Caribbean countries with limited access to development finance. Saint Lucia, for example, has been using PPPs for the last two decades. Early examples include the building and operation of the Ministry of Communications complex in 1997 and new police stations in 2000. Other examples are road improvement projects using private sector partners. More broadly speaking, the private sector must be incentivized to participate in financing critical aspects of the 2030 Agenda. This will be possible as governments make clear what their priorities areas are, and are able to skillfully negotiate with the private sector to bear a balanced portion of the risks and returns. It is important that such partnerships be based on transparency and accountability.

It has also been suggested that development banks might be more appropriate as a vehicle for financing development rather than commercial banks. Recently, however, such banks, where they still exist, tend to on lend to the commercial banks, with the same strict evaluation criteria for accessing loans. Thus, even though considerable liquidity exists in domestic banking systems, it has been difficult to incentivize the private sector to support certain areas of sustainable development.

A WAY FORWARD

The issue of sourcing financing for development is so critical that a solution has to be found. In light of the COVID-19 crisis, immediate additional financing is necessary on concessional terms in order to forestall the diminution of resources to existing projects and activities.

A number of useful proposals have been offered in the initiative co-convened by Jamaica and Canada and led by the Secretary general of the United Nations, called, Financing for development in the era of Covid19 and beyond.

Among some of those proposed are the following:

Immediate responses

- Across-the-board debt stand still for all developing countries that have no access to financial markets and cannot service their debt.
- Provide foreign currency liquidity to developing countries through dollar swaps.

Medium-term responses

- Establishment of sovereign debt restructuring mechanisms.
- Increase IMF quota subscriptions or issue additional special drawing rights (SDRs).

A number of recommendations have also been made over time, including some proposed by ECLAC, to address the financing gap.

THE CARIBBEAN RESILIENCE FUND[6]

It has been recognized that to address the sustainable development of the Caribbean, long-term low-cost development financing is necessary.

ECLAC has proposed the initiation of a global fund[7] that can be rolled out at the regional level to address Caribbean resilience building especially with respect to region-wide project. Such a fund would attract large scale financing, including concessional financing from the Green Climate Fund (GCF) which can also be used to leverage other financial flows to the region. While there are a variety of other facilities aimed at climate financing, the GCF remains a major source of concessional finance.

A DEBT FOR CLIMATE ADAPTATION SWAP INITIATIVE

Under this initiative, ECLAC proposed the use of funds from various supporting financial sources, to reduce the debt at a discount with the resultant repayment placed in a resilience fund to address green investments aimed at climate change mitigation and adaptation and economic transformation.

[6] The European Union (EU) has signed two agreements with the World Bank's (WB) Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery (GFDRR) to provide funding totaling EUR 30.7 million that will strengthen disaster risk management (DRM) in the Caribbean. The programs will support Caribbean countries to plan for long-term resilience and climate-smart growth strategies, and to design and implement innovative policy and investment initiatives. The two programmes that will benefit are the Caribbean Regional Resilience Building Facility (EUR 27.7 million) and the Technical Assistance Program for Disaster Risk Financing and Insurance in Caribbean Overseas Countries and Territories (OCTs) (EUR 3 million). The Caribbean Regional Resilience Building Facility will support 15 Caribbean countries by providing technical assistance to mainstream resilience, leveraging investments to reduce vulnerability, and expanding financial protection against disasters.

[7] The Caribbean Resilience Fund.

CLIMATE CHANGE FINANCING AND THE GCF.

Climate change impact is an existential threat to the subregion and being able to address its effects in all sectors is most important.

One of the major sources of concessional finance for adaptation purposes is available through the GCF. However, few Caribbean countries have been able to access substantial resources from the GCF, as the process is complex. Caribbean member states must join with other SIDS to lobby to make this process more accessible.

STATE CONTINGENT INSTRUMENTS

In light of the extreme vulnerability of the Caribbean, countries have been calling on the International Financial Institutions (IFIs) to support state contingent instruments such as GDP linked bonds, and hurricane clauses to address debt service challenges that arise when countries face extreme events such as natural disasters and external economic shocks.

Such instruments will waive debt repayments until a crisis is over. It is important to note that both Barbados and Grenada have been able to secure limited waivers in their hurricane clauses and it is suggested that this should be the norm in future borrowing among Caribbean SIDS.

CONCLUSION

Financing for sustainable development remains a work in progress, and Caribbean countries must explore every opportunity to raise such finance at relatively low cost both domestically and internationally.

In the short run the opportunities for significant financial inflows are limited, since growth is expected to be negative in 2020 and may not be robust in 2021. At the same time, new demands have risen for investment in the health sector to prepare for future pandemics, and in supporting a robust ICT infrastructure to give a few examples. For this reason, various initiatives must be pursued, as has been argued in this article, to increase financing to address the Sustainable Development Goals. ■

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INCLUSIVE AND EQUITABLE EDUCATION IN THE CARIBBEAN AND THE PATH TOWARDS ENSURING QUALITY EDUCATION FOR ALL IN A POST-PANDEMIC ERA

Catarina Camarinhas *

The health and socio-economic fallout of the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) has caused an unprecedented crisis in all areas. In the education sector, the coronavirus pandemic has led to massive disruptions with the temporary closure of all face-to-face educational facilities, impacting some 2.3 million students across the Caribbean (see figure 2).[1] Major impacts in this sector include the interruption of student learning, the postponement of assessments and examinations, and gaps in childcare.

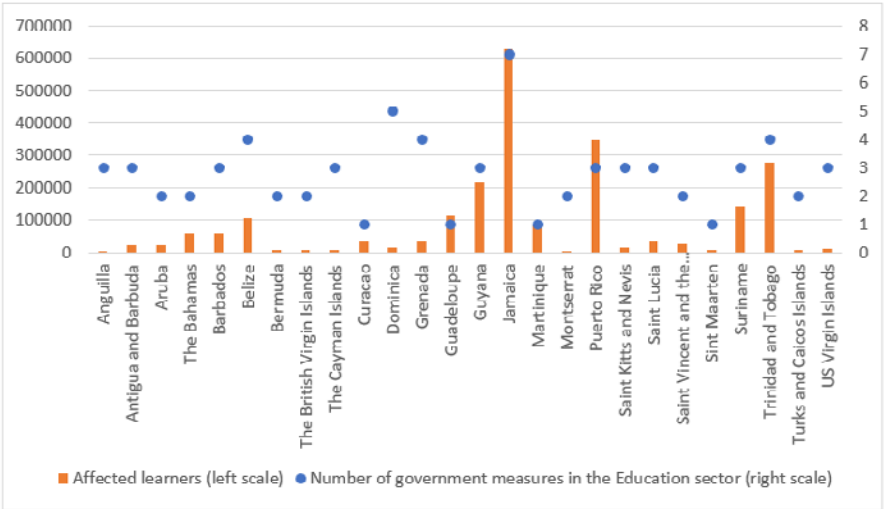
In addition, the pandemic has indirectly impacted healthcare systems, increased the risks of school dropout, and forced adjustment to distance and home schooling. Many parents are coping with new pressures in allocating time for housework, paid work, and a sudden and unexpected increase in childcare responsibilities.

Although all Caribbean countries have quickly transitioned to different modalities of distance learning, school closures and associated impacts have exposed the harsh inequalities in access to education services. These inequalities are expressed both in terms of access as well as equity and quality, disproportionately affecting disadvantaged families who tend to have fewer educational opportunities beyond school and rely on school services for food, nutrition and other basic services. Lack of access to technology, limited internet connectivity and overcrowding, are obstacles to continued and distance learning.

Caribbean Governments responded with inventiveness, collaborating with the private sector[2] and international agencies to address inequalities in access to services. This unprecedented crisis required coordinated, integrated measures to address challenges in the education sector. In addition to school closures, learning continuity plans have been designed and are being implemented throughout the Caribbean. Government measures in the education sector (Figure 3) during this emergency response were mostly related to the transition to distance learning, in the following main areas of action:

- Flexible learning modalities and tools tailored for different age groups and particular needs;
- Access to technology, including learning devices;
- Coordinated strategy for postponement of assessments;
- Continuity of school meals programmes;
- Mental health support and other initiatives.

Figure 2 Caribbean (26 countries): number of measures in the education sector and number of students affected, by country



Source: ECLAC "COVID-19 Observatory in Latin America and the Caribbean: measures by country", and UNESCO Institute for Statistics.

Despite this important effort by governments and education systems, the international community has remained alert to the widening of pre-existing gaps,[3] posing a risk of reversing progress on Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG4) on Quality Education and, in particular, target 4.5 which aims to eliminate disparities in "access to all levels of education for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous

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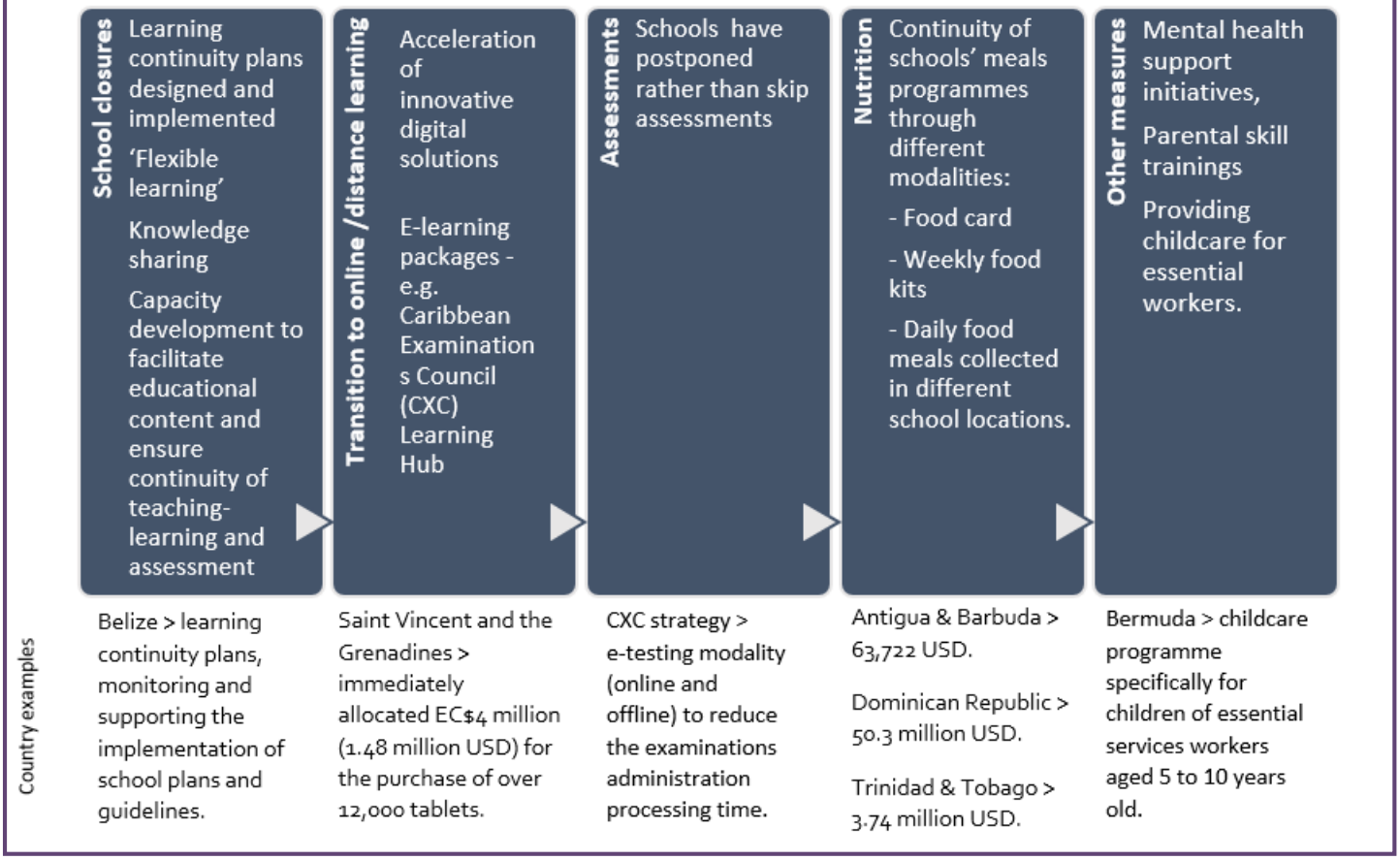
[1] These estimates are based on enrolment figures from UNESCO Institute for Statistics and includes pre-primary, primary, secondary and tertiary education enrolment for 26 Caribbean countries: Anguilla, Aruba, Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Bermuda, British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands, Curaçao, Dominica, Grenada, Guadeloupe, Guyana, Jamaica, Martinique, Montserrat, Puerto Rico, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Sint Maarten, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago, Turks and Caicos Islands, and United States Virgin Islands. When including Cuba, Dominican Republic, and Haiti the total would be 11.9 million affected learners.

[2] For example, the Cable and Wireless Charitable Foundation (CWCF) has partnered with Flow and One on One Educational Services Limited to provide free access to a virtual education platform, available to all students across the Caribbean regardless of their network operator. The Universal Service Funds have provided digital devices to students during the COVID lockdown.

[3] UNESCO has highlighted major gaps in the education sector, such as unequal distribution of teachers.

Figure 3: Key measures taken by countries in the education sector



peoples and children in vulnerable situations", further aggravating the pre-existing learning crisis and eroding the socioeconomic resilience of those who are most vulnerable (UN, Policy Brief: Education during COVID-19 and beyond, 2020).

The pandemic has exposed the need to deliver on the right to education and to rethink education systems, to promote inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all, drawing attention to opportunities for the most vulnerable in the post pandemic education system. Regarding equity and inclusion, government response should focus on the most vulnerable and marginalized population groups – including children with disability, migrant children, refugees, and displaced persons, indigenous peoples, and the most socioeconomically disadvantaged populations.

As countries move to rebuild and address the safe reopening of their educational institutions, the priority must be to prevent the health crisis from escalating into a humanitarian, developmental and education crisis. The post-pandemic response offers an opportunity to address the education system's challenges, including shortcomings in digital inclusion and innovation, quality and relevance, focusing on improving the content of curricula, stressing the need for interdisciplinary and intersectoral coordination, particularly health, nutrition and social protection, as well as adequate investment in the resources needed to rebuild lost learning, having in mind the significant impacts from the crisis. Now, more than ever, the global community must ensure the collective commitment made in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and in SDG4 on education in particular, to reform Caribbean education into equitable and inclusive systems that contribute to fulfilling the international community's promise to 'leave no one behind'. ■

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COVID-19 AND THE PLEDGE TO LEAVE NO ONE BEHIND

Shari Johnson *

The COVID-19 pandemic is as much a development crisis as it is a health crisis. With inequality high and rising throughout the Caribbean, the pandemic has highlighted a web of inequalities faced by the working poor and those furthest behind.

Despite its exacerbation of these issues, recovery from the pandemic presents the subregion with an opportunity to renew its commitment to the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda and pursue concrete action in building a more inclusive socioeconomic framework to improve the lives of citizens and ensure that no one is left behind. Although there is no single Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) that addresses this, the pledge to leave no one behind is cross-cutting and centered broadly on the idea of inclusion in such a way as to improve the lives of the working poor and those most disadvantaged.

INCOME INEQUALITY, HOUSING AND ACCESS TO LAND

Notwithstanding the fact that several Caribbean countries are categorized as upper-middle and high-income countries,[1] income inequality remains high in the subregion. Income inequality is certain to widen even more as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In curtailing the spread of the disease, measures such as curtailed hours of operation and the temporary closure of entire economic sectors were implemented. This has meant job losses or reduced salaries for many, exacerbating the income insecurity of many low-income households, and further worsening the welfare of the working poor, since insufficient financial resources impacted the well-being of their households and limited their opportunities to maximize their potential.

The adverse economic impact of COVID-19 has been most pressing for women, and particularly women working in the informal sectors, such as wholesale and trade, hospitality, and food services. Stay-at-home orders, shrinking consumption, and declining demand in both the local and export markets are estimated to have cut informal-sector earnings by nearly 60 per cent globally in the first month of the pandemic.[2] For women and their families already living in poverty, the impact was a shock to their economic stability overall, since it has undermined their ability to purchase critical necessities, such as medicine and food.

COVID-19 has also highlighted the prevalence of unsound housing conditions and the need to recognize dignified housing and access to land as basic human rights. Stay-at-home orders involved intrinsic assumptions regarding access to adequate housing, a reliable supply of clean water and appropriate sanitation facilities. Many poor households throughout the subregion lack these basic amenities. It is also a common practice among low-income households for a large number of inhabitants to live within very limited space. The combination of these factors makes safe social distancing difficult, if not impossible, for several families.

FOOD AND NUTRITION INSECURITY

In no uncertain terms, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the already unsustainable food supply systems of the subregion, not only with respect to ensuring food security, but also in ensuring adequate and healthy nutrition, particularly of the working poor.

It is impossible to overlook the link between income and food security. Job loss and increased prices have worsened the problem of access to food and, notably, job loss and reduced income was more prominent among women, indicating a possible gender disparity in the susceptibility to food insecurity during the pandemic. The pandemic has also highlighted situations of nutritional inequality as income-secure persons flocked to groceries and other retail items to purchase food supplies in bulk, while daily paid and those in the informal sector were unable to do so.

The subregion was forced to confront the food security and nutritional vulnerability of its youth. The closure of schools for varying periods meant that thousands of children no longer had access to a secured daily source of nutrition via national school feeding programmes. Some States meted out social support programmes in the form of temporary food cards, hampers or deliveries of prepared lunches. Still, with families already facing reduced

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[1] Based on World Bank Income Classification.

[2] Taken from a policy brief by the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, 2020.

food availability and access it is not unlikely that the children as well as adults in these households may resort to cheaper, calorie-dense food options. Sustained consumption of unbalanced diets and increased sedentary habits (working from home, virtual learning, closure of exercise facilities) are likely to exacerbate the subregion's effort to address the prevalent non-communicable diseases such as obesity, diabetes and undernourishment.

EDUCATION GAP AND THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

A heavy reliance on technology was occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic, but many poor households cannot afford the information and communication technology (ICT) devices such as laptops or tablets that are necessary for students to continue online modalities for learning, or adults to work from home and for both to maintain healthy social interaction.

Rural communities lack ICT infrastructure and where they exist, poor service impedes access to a reliable internet connection. In these circumstances, an education gap may be reasonably expected as the youth living in these conditions are disadvantaged in their schooling. More broadly, these households or communities are further removed from fully participating in economic activities as essential business services like bill payment and legal filings have moved to online platforms, thus contributing to the widening of the rural-urban gap in digital inequality. These realities call for renewed digital policies and planning focused on people and geared towards expanding access to existing technologies for underserved communities rather than the introduction of new technologies to a limited section of the population, so as to ensure that all communities benefit from technological development.

GOVERNANCE

Like other small island developing States (SIDS), the level of public debt is high in many Caribbean countries. Still, several islands have expanded social safety nets to extend social support to vulnerable households during the pandemic.

These have included income grants, food cards or deliveries of food for those in need. These initiatives and policy actions, although timely and needed, add to government deficits and public sector debts and place the burden on future generations to repay accumulated debt.

CONCLUSIONS

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has forced the Caribbean to confront the intersectionality of the underlying vulnerabilities faced by the working poor.

Simultaneously, a holistic approach to economic recovery from the pandemic can provide the impetus needed to bring those most disadvantaged into the economically active fold in line with the promise of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to leave no one behind. To effectively do so, the subregion must deepen its commitment to evidence-based planning aided by robust and disaggregated official statistics which are needed to determine exactly who is at risk of being left behind and why.

Housing policies should be revisited such that adequate housing with reliable access to amenities is considered a basic human right. The corporate capture and commodification of land tenure needs to be addressed. While economic shocks cannot be eradicated, focus should be on the creation of jobs with a livable, decent wage rather than unsustainable low-wage jobs. The reality of nutrition insecurity supports the longstanding need for a targeted and sustainable approach to reducing food insecurity, lest the pandemic exacerbate a food crisis. In the medium-term, subregional food production needs to be scaled up along the lines of States' comparative advantage while promoting intra-regional food trade.

In implementing these suggested measures, disadvantaged communities whose livelihood will be impacted by the different initiatives and policies need to be consulted and their opinions factored into the decision-making process. Greater collaboration with community-based groups and civil society can offer opportunities for direct engagement with poor households and communities and stand a greater chance of succeeding in ensuring that post-COVID-19, the 2030 Agenda's promise to leave no one behind will not be derailed. ■

CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT IN SUPPORT OF SDG IMPLEMENTATION

Shirelle Floyd *

Civil society is an essential partner in the sustainable development process. Civil society engagement offers a unique opportunity to foster local ownership of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). A strong and engaged civil society is, therefore, one of the key elements in the implementation of the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development and the achievement of the SDGs. However, civil society has not been optimally engaged in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

Recognizing that the 2030 Agenda cannot be achieved with efforts from the government alone, many have called for more active civil society participation in SDG implementation at the global, regional and national levels.

At the 2019 *Forum of the Countries of Latin America and the Caribbean on Sustainable Development* held in Santiago, Chile, ECLAC Executive Secretary Alicia Bárcena made a call for civil society's inclusion and participation in the follow up and review process of the global framework of the 2030 Agenda. Bárcena emphasized that there must be effort to create a space for civil society contributions as we move towards developing a more sustainable world. She said, "Along with governments, we have the duty to create the conditions and collaborate so that civil society may develop and maintain effective modalities of organization, coordination, participation, dialogue and collaboration for the follow-up and review of progress on the Agenda's implementation, at a national and regional level."[1]

The availability of relevant data is essential for monitoring and reporting on the progress in achieving the SDGs. However, many small island developing States (SIDS) including those of the Caribbean continue to face the long-standing challenge of timely production and dissemination of official statistics. This challenge is particularly acute in the case of environmental statistics. Meanwhile, civil society organizations (CSO) constantly generate data at the community level, especially on social and environmental subjects, including data relevant to marginalized and vulnerable populations. As such, one way to meaningfully engage civil society participation is through collaboration to fill data gaps, using citizen-generated data, in national and sub-national reporting on the SDGs.

Partners for Review (2019)[2] highlighted that recently some countries, for example Colombia and Uruguay have demonstrated a strong commitment to engaging non-state actors such as civil society and have had strong collaborations with them to fill those data gaps. Against that background, there is a case for leveraging alternate data sources outside of the traditional National Statistical System (NSS) using data produced by civil society.
Among others, partnerships between governments and civil society and other non-state actors are critical to ensuring that no one is left behind in the pursuit of Agenda 2030. Civil society offers varied expertise and resources that can be harnessed to ensure effective monitoring, review, and accountability in the implementation of the SDGs.

CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT IN THE SDGS IN THE CARIBBEAN

Inclusive institutions, accountable governance and partnerships are essential parts of civil society arrangement. Mainstreaming civil society engagement as part of a nation's SDG implementation strategy is particularly helpful in advancing the achievement of targets set in SDGs 16 and 17, which speak to civil society "inclusion" and "partnerships," respectively.

In the Caribbean, there have been good examples of civil society engagement in the implementation of the SDGs. Such engagement has been from two main approaches: (i) Participatory, through collaboration with Government; and (ii) Integratory, through incorporation of the SDGs into their work and advocacy.

Civil society and government collaboration:
Many Caribbean countries have reported on the active engagement of civil society, along with other non-state actors, in national action plans and committees

CIVIL SOCIETY

inclusion and partnership
is essential for accelerating the Sustainable Development Goals.

SDG Target 16.: "Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels"

SDG Target 17. "Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development."

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[1] See Camu, Guido (2019). The Importance of Strengthening Civil Society Participation to Fulfill the 2030 Agenda is Underscored, Forum of the Countries of Latin America and the Caribbean on Sustainable Development (2019). Available at: https://foroalc2030.cepal.org/2019/en/news/importance-strengthening-civil-society-participation-fulfill-2030-agenda-underscored

[2] TPartner For Review (P4R) is a transnational multi-stakeholder network for a robust review process of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It is an initiative implemented by the German Society for International Cooperation (GIZ). P4R (2019)-Voluntary National Reviews –a Comparative Analysis was submitted to the 2019 High-level Political Forum for Sustainable Development.

set up for the implementation of the SDGs. The Bahamas, Dominica, Guyana, Jamaica, Saint Lucia, and Trinidad and Tobago have indicated inclusion of civil society in their national action plans and Voluntary National Review (VNR) processes. Some countries have set up spaces for active civil society contribution such as the Coalition of Civil Society Organizations in Saint Lucia. This was recently established as a CSO-Government Platform for Dialogue. This platform provides education, strengthens civil society capacity and promotes civil society partnership for national dialogue on the SDGs which will assist in the monitoring of national progress. A similar platform, the Caribbean Civil Society Sustainable Development Goals Knowledge Platform,[3] was launched by The Caribbean Natural Resource Institute (CANARI) in 2019. The platform aims to increase the visibility of civil society contributions in the subregion, while simultaneously raising awareness of their engagement in and advancement of the SDGs. It offers space for CSOs in the Caribbean to share their experiences on how they are playing a part in SDG implementation. So far, the platform has received contributions from Anguilla, the Bahamas, Grenada, Guyana, Monserrat, Saint Lucia and Trinidad and Tobago. Notably, CANARI was included in the official VNR presentation by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago at the 2020 UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development.

Civil society ownership of the SDGs: In reshaping and aligning their organization's grassroots activities, CSOs are championing the SDGs through their existing programmes in the communities (See Figure 4). By so doing, civil society is not only enhancing participatory governance but also creating a space for local ownership of the SDGs.

Figure 4: Regional activities by civil society aligned with the SDGs

Organization	Activity	SDGs in Action
Healthy Caribbean Coalition (HCC)	Multisectoral action in the prevention and control of noncommunicable diseases-with focus on NCD-related SDG indicators	3
CANARI- Caribbean Civil Society Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Knowledge Platform-	The platform aims to promote and enhance civil society inclusion in and contributions to development, implementation, monitoring and reporting on the SDGs.	17
Coalition of Civil Society Organizations, St. Lucia	Education, civil society capacity building, advocacy promotion, monitoring of the SDGs	16, 17
Gouyave Fishermen Cooperative Society Ltd, Grenada	Coastal and marine resources governance and management	14
Building Back Better in Dominica- Habitat for Humanity Trinidad and Tobago	Repairing homes, training in construction and damage assessments, preparation of baseline study	11
AQUA Montserrat	Turtle conservation and ocean awareness	13, 14

ENTER COVID-19

With the emergence of COVID-19, civil society organizations have been instrumental in the subregion's fight against the pandemic. With their footprint in local communities, they have been quick to lend support to marginalized and vulnerable populations through the provision of food, medical supplies and psychosocial support.

Indeed, government agencies, at the height of the pandemic, relied heavily on CSOs to help them meet the needs of vulnerable populations.

Despite the many contributions of CSOs and the potential for greater collaboration with government entities in the implementation of the SDGs, civil society in the Caribbean is challenged by limited technical capacity to properly measure contributions, including through data collection, monitoring and reporting, and duplication of efforts because of inadequate coordination among CSOs that are working towards similar goals. A more systematic approach of CSO-Government collaboration will go a long way towards augmenting the technical capacity of CSOs and promote collaboration among CSOs, which ultimately enhances the contribution they can make to the 2030 Agenda.

▸ (continued on page 14)

[3] The Caribbean Civil Society Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Knowledge Platform can be found here: https://hub.canari.org/sdg/

▸ (continued from page 13)

CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT IN SUPPORT OF SDG IMPLEMENTATION *(CONTINUED)*

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

For accelerated action in the implementation of the SDGs in this new decade, civil society must play a more active role. As the world prepares for life after COVID-19, the United Nations calls for countries to "build back better" by "creating more sustainable, resilient and inclusive societies".

For the Caribbean, this implies meaningful CSO engagement on the SDGs, through creating a space for civil society collaboration, technical support for grant applications and data collection, support from the private sector and, networking and coordination among CSOs. Partnering with civil society for the generation of new data sources can also be explored with support, guidance and validation from the National Statistical Offices (NSOs). Achieving the 2030 Agenda is already an ambitious undertaking for the Caribbean and it therefore requires a multilevel and multi-stakeholder approach that must include a space for civil society to engage in responsible advocacy for the implementation of the SDGs. ■

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