



# CANARI Policy Brief

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## Governance and Civil Society Participation in Sustainable Development in the Caribbean

### Key concepts

**Civil Society:** is defined as the set of organised non-state and non-commercial actors, including: conservation and development organisations, non-governmental networks and coalitions, natural resource user groups and community based organisations

**Governance:** the rules, processes and practices through which power and decision-making are shared within an institution and within society. The concept of 'good' governance refers to a number of values, which are considered key to ensuring equitable and inclusive forms of decision-making. These include: participation, transparency and accountability.

**Participation:** both a process and an outcome through which concerned stakeholders become actors in decision-making that affects their lives and their communities.

**Sustainable development:** the participatory transformation of the political culture to enable a democratic process of allocating the use of resources for equitable economic and social development over a sustained period of time and within the constraints of the socio-cultural carrying capacity.

of development but greater stakeholder participation is proving a viable option for the effective management of natural resources. It is also increasingly recognised as an effective framework for addressing objectives of poverty alleviation, economic development and social equity. There are however considerable domestic and international constraints hindering the ability of citizens in the Caribbean to effectively participate and influence decision-making concerning these issues. This has serious implications for sustainable development and the livelihoods of Caribbean people.

Policy Brief No. 5 highlights some of the key findings of a regional survey undertaken by CANARI in 2003. It uncovers some of the constraints faced by civil society organisations in the region and points the way forward for future action for both state agencies and civil society organisations.

### Approaches to Governance

Over the past 15 years, governance, or rather 'good' governance and civil society have become key issues in the debate on democratisation, development and poverty reduction. The failure of the free market to provide adequate economic equity and social justice across the globe, means notions of civil society and participation have come to occupy a more prominent place in the discourse of development. People-centred approaches to sustainable development, if harnessed and nurtured, are being increasingly recognised for their ability to strengthen democracy, increase social cohesion and balance the excesses of the market.

International financial bodies, such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), were among the first international organisations to address the issue

### Introduction

The importance of people's participation in sustainable development is increasingly acknowledged. Stakeholders and civil society organisations are not only demanding a greater say in the future direction

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European Commission

of governance. This concern arose largely from the need to explore why so many international development initiatives had failed. Little consideration was given to citizen participation and issues of equity and justice were at best an afterthought to the role of the state and opening up of international markets. In recent years, under increasing pressure from civil society, but also through a greater recognition by governments of the limitations of what they could achieve without social partners, the focus of governance has shifted to enhance the participation of citizens and take greater account of social and economic equity – with varying degrees of success.

The United Nations (UN) have integrated a notion of governance into their development discourse that recognises the importance of citizen participation in social and political processes. This has begun to be shaped around a rights-based framework, which asserts the role of civil society as essential to governance processes, to the deepening of democratic decision-making and to the protection of citizens' rights. By embedding the notion of governance (and, therefore participation) within a rights discourse, the UN has not only been able to clearly express the linkages between good governance and international human rights law, but also to emphasise the centrality of issues of equity, justice and participation to the sustainable development agenda.

## Regional Overview

The Caribbean region has made some progress since the 1992 Rio Earth Summit in addressing a participatory agenda. The responses have taken the following directions:

- Establishment of national policy-making and coordinating bodies such as national sustainable development councils
- Strengthening of existing, or establishment of new, environmental management agencies in some countries
- The use of participatory approaches to review and formulate national policies, as has been the case in the forestry sector in Grenada
- An increase in participatory approaches in land use and physical planning initiatives

Despite formal stated commitments to promote sustainable development, and clear acknowledgement that it requires governance structures that facilitate citizen participation, progress in this area has at best been limited. Despite the diversity in the region, there are a number of common themes and challenges facing state and civil society actors across the Caribbean in their effort to create policies and institutions that favour citizen participation and good governance.

## The Role of Participatory Processes

In response to the many challenges facing Caribbean society participatory processes can contribute to a social integration agenda by:

- 1 Improving equitable economic and social development (particularly for marginalised stakeholders) through the use of devolved decision-making to determine how resources are managed and allocated.
- 2 Reducing the fragmentation which has developed over the years along lines of class, gender, ethnicity, education and political affiliation, and which is responsible for many of the problems now faced by Caribbean societies.
- 3 Restoring or building a social capital of trust, respect, cooperation and tolerance, which is a critical asset in the pursuit of sustainable development.

## Common Themes and Challenges in the Insular Caribbean

### Political Context

- State is retreating from role as welfare provider – impacting most acutely on the poor and marginalised.
- State is reluctant to decentralise decision-making, increasing the alienation of citizens from the state.
- Citizens and their organisations are making demands for further democratisation across the region.

### Socio-economic context

- Globalisation, particularly trade liberalisation, is undermining the ability of Caribbean states to determine their own development paths. The resulting increase in foreign control of major economic sectors, especially agriculture and tourism – and the continued exploitation of natural resources at unsustainable levels to meet the demands of these sectors – has further exacerbated inequitable relationships.
- Large segments of society have been traditionally excluded from ownership and control of land and resources.

### Institutional context

- Despite a formal recognition of the importance of civil society participation demonstrated by CARICOM's Charter of Civil Society, the legislation

that would enable member states to implement the provisions of the Charter has not been put in place.

- Spaces for engagement between the state and civil society have developed (e.g. National Sustainable Development Councils) but these have remained isolated instances rather than part of a concerted trend that institutionalises citizen participation.

### Geographical and cultural context

- The concept of a Caribbean region is rooted in a broadly shared history and identity but characterised by considerable linguistic, cultural and ethnic diversity. The region's post-war history has been characterised by efforts (with varying degrees of success) made by both the state and civil society to build a sense of Caribbean unity.
- Efforts have however been constrained by the geopolitical reality of international, particularly US, influence that has limited both the scope and effectiveness of these actions.

## Civil Society organisations in focus

The regional context provides the backdrop against which the issue of civil society participation in the area of natural resource management occurs, and the framework that either constrains or facilitates this involvement. Within this context a number of key factors can be identified that are having a significant impact on the capacity of civil society organisations to effect change within the region. These include:

**Financing:** The economic downward spiral and the shifting priorities of donor organisations has resulted in the reduction of financial support for natural resource NGOs and community groups in the Caribbean. This has resulted in contraction of programme activities for many civil society organisations.

**Communication:** Natural resource use is primarily based on individual rather than group activity. This affects the capacity of many NGOs to engage with stakeholders who are not members of formal groups. Arguably, some of the groups that are on the ground and purporting to represent the interests of resource users reflect existing power relations and may exclude marginalised less obvious stakeholders (e.g. women and young people).

**Internal Structures:** Too few civil society organisations 'practice what they preach'. Despite strong commitments to increase participation externally this is not necessarily reflected internally in the management structures of the organisation.

**Succession Planning:** Having witnessed the departure of a generation of civil society leaders in the 1990s, there is increasing concern amongst civil society organisations about the retention of senior staff and board members. Few however have identified ways of addressing this issue successfully.

## An Agenda for Civil Society Action

A number of issues constitute serious challenges and opportunities for natural resource management organisations and other civil society actors who would like to promote greater citizen participation in decision-making processes.

**Building sustainable development through participation:** Many in the region now see participation as a necessary part of development. Yet there is a gulf that has yet to be bridged between rhetoric and action. Progress towards the adoption of a more participatory form of sustainable development has been stunted by a prevailing culture of decision-making that is top down. People's participation is still seen as a threat and is largely associated with a loss of power by the state and its agencies. Where the notion of citizen participation has been adopted it has tended to overvalue "consultation" and undervalue actual involvement. This has resulted in stylistic exercises that have not actually informed decision-making. In this context there is a need to clarify the meaning of participation for government, civil society organisations and citizens, with an emphasis placed on its potential to transform society.

**Promoting a rights-based approach:** The predominant approach to governance is still coloured by considerations of effective and efficient government. More recently efforts aimed at institutionalising civil society participation have made greater reference to a rights-based approach to sustainable development. This approach is not yet widespread but its discourse, characterised by explicit references to human rights, equity and justice, needs to be championed by state and civil society organisations alike.

**Taking good governance from discourse to practice:** Good governance is on the agenda of civil society organisations, national governments and regional organisations, yet the prevailing culture hinders the development of institutions that promote the participation of citizens in development. A shift is needed whereby states view their power as an opportunity to act in concert with civil society for the common good, rather than as a means to control it.

**Leading by example - internal governance:** In order to build examples at the local or micro level, civil society organisations need to become examples of good governance. The need to "practice what you

preach” has been highlighted, because a common rebuff to organisations that call for greater democracy and transparency is that they themselves are not accountable for their actions. Organisations need to be able to demonstrate that they facilitate active participation both inside and outside the organisation, ensuring equal opportunities and inclusion.

**Demonstrating that participation works:** While decision makers have been sensitised to the need for participation, there is plenty to be done to show how it can improve people’s lives and the management of natural resources. This means there is need for example to develop and promote methods for monitoring and evaluation so that the impacts and outcomes of participation can be assessed.

**Making linkages:** Civil society organisations focussed on natural resource management can be isolated (especially where they have a technical remit). There is need for them to build alliances and linkages with other stakeholders (governmental, non-governmental as well as from the private sector) in order to inform and mainstream sustainable development debates. This will mean redefining natural resource management and placing it in a broader political context. By doing this civil society can help to redefine politics – which has become a byword for partisan and sectarian power play in the region.

**Building capacity:** The term capacity building has to be re-examined in order to enable civil society to equip itself to participate in natural resource

management. The traditional view has been that capacities consist of skills and systems that merely needed to be developed (usually via training). While this aspect of capacity building remains important, a broader view is needed – one that considers the particular circumstances and requirements of organisations. A new framework must encompass all aspects of organisational developmental needs that lead to the placing of citizens – particularly the poor and the marginalised at the centre of decision-making processes.

## Civil Society and Sustainable Development

Sustainable development can only truly exist within systems of governance that are characterised by accountable and transparent decision-making that provide for the participation of all citizens. Participatory processes contribute to effective natural resource management and are a precondition for the “sustainability” of all development issues. Effective natural resource management not only requires the transformation of the political culture to enable the democratic, participatory processes to determine how resources are allocated, but the empowerment of citizens to take a more active role in decision-making related to the use and management of natural resources. It demands a strong civil society made up of community organisations and NGOs with the capacity to represent their constituents and provide effective methods for citizen participation.

## Caribbean Natural Resources Institute

The Caribbean Natural Resources Institute (CANARI) is an independent, regional, technical assistance organisation with more than 20 years of experience on issues of conservation, the environment, and sustainable development in the islands of the Caribbean.

CANARI’s mission is to create avenues for the equitable participation and effective collaboration of Caribbean communities and institutions in managing the use of natural resources critical to development.

The Institute has specific interest and extensive experience in the identification and promotion of participatory approaches to natural resource management.

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