Summary

This paper describes an action research and learning process in which an independent regional organisation, the Caribbean Natural Resources Institute, sought to support Caribbean countries in achieving strong negotiating positions in the global sustainable development initiatives taking place in 2014-2015. The paper identifies lessons from the process that can be of use to governments of small-island and other resource-constrained countries engaging in global sustainable development processes, as well as institutions offering those countries technical advice and support.
1. Introduction

Late in 2015, the United Nations (UN) member states will convene to negotiate a new international development framework to replace the Millennium Development Goals. This framework will be articulated through a set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and related national and global targets. Also at the end of 2015, the annual Conference of Parties of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) is expected to finalise a new and potentially binding international climate action agreement.

In 2014, the UN convened the Third International Conference on Small Island Developing States (SIDS) in Samoa to develop a new international framework, known as the SAMOA Pathway, for addressing the special challenges faced by SIDS. These processes are of special importance to Caribbean SIDS, since their own sustainable development pathways are heavily influenced by actions and decisions that take place outside their borders. Although the region contributes very little to the causes of climate change, it is affected disproportionately by its impacts. Inequitable trade regimes, high levels of debt, persistent poverty, over-dependence on fossil fuels, vulnerability to natural disasters, and lack of incentives for sustainable natural resource use are among the challenges to Caribbean sustainable development that can only be addressed through international cooperation, investment and support.

Caribbean countries take an active role in international processes such as those taking place this year. By combining their efforts through regional institutions such as the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) and larger groups like the Association of Small Island States (AOSIS), they have been able to at least partially overcome the constraints of small size and limited human capacity. Their strong participation as part of AOSIS in the climate change negotiations has been particularly effective. Even so, they lack the access to information and technical advice that allows larger countries to dominate international negotiations.

Caribbean positioning in these negotiations also suffer from inadequate engagement from key government agencies and civil society “back home” that could help negotiators to hone in on key issues and clearly define priorities for the region, while also building awareness of the process, how countries can benefit and what will be expected of them in follow-up.

The Caribbean Natural Resources Institute (CANARI) is a member of the Independent Research Forum (IRF2015), which believes that the ultimate success of the post-2015 development framework will depend on how effectively it can be applied to widely varying social, economic and political contexts. IRF2015 members are working to improve understanding of these different contexts and of the measures needed to assure that the agreements being negotiated are relevant to them. One such process is underway in the Caribbean under the leadership of CANARI. Taking an action-learning approach, CANARI has been providing technical support to Caribbean negotiators at the United Nations over the past year, engaging directly in national and regional post-2015 consultations, and facilitating dialogue among stakeholders and within civil society. This paper describes the activities undertaken, discusses what has been learned so far, and identifies opportunities for further research and action.
2. Approach and activities

2.1. The approach
Action research and learning involves structured engagement of stakeholders in real situations that offer opportunities for shared learning and analysis through a cycle of research and action that simultaneously:

- assists in practical problem-solving and effecting change;
- expands knowledge and understanding; and
- enhances competencies of the actors involved.

The action-learning approach also involves channelling the learning into advocacy processes aimed at changing perspectives, policy, practice and behaviours.

This action-learning process has focused on identifying the requirements for developing and negotiating a strong Caribbean position on the post-2015 agenda – one that is rooted in broad-based stakeholder input and sound technical advice. The primary stakeholders in the process are the CARICOM country negotiators who have been participating as a bloc in the UN Open Working Group (OWG) on SDGs and other aspects of the post-2015 agenda. A wider circle of stakeholders participated in individual activities or as targets for advocacy. In addition, the CANARI team had its own action-learning agenda to understand how a non-governmental technical organisation could best engage in a global policy process.

2.2. The process
The first step in the process was to build a relationship with the CARICOM negotiators. CANARI had an initial opportunity to connect with a few Caribbean negotiators through a series of retreats organised by IRF2015 for OWG members starting in early 2014. These interactions stimulated discussion on the forms of advice and support the negotiators needed and how CANARI might assist.

The negotiators shared with CANARI the challenges they were having in developing strong negotiating positions reflecting regional priorities. While they were getting some support from the lead agencies back in their home countries, the breadth and depth of the post-2015 agenda required input from a wider range of government agencies, with which the negotiators had little or no contact. Ideas from the handful of dialogues among civil society were not reaching negotiators. They were also largely isolated from regional experts and centres of knowledge that could have provided detailed advice and recommendations on specific issues. Accessing technical assistance from CARICOM agencies was a bureaucratic process that was not feasible given the short timeframes negotiators had for reviewing, responding and inputting into documents being negotiated. While some CARICOM agencies were willing to provide support, they were not well connected to the global negotiation processes and so not aware of the best opportunities to engage. Much of the support negotiators needed was supposed to come from a CARICOM Expert Group that, although called for by CARICOM Heads of Government in 2013, never got off the ground.

On the basis of these discussions, the negotiators and CANARI agreed on three priority areas for shared learning and action: a) identifying priority SDG issues for the Caribbean; b) translating those priorities into clearly articulated and well-evidenced proposals on SDG goals and targets; and c) developing

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linkages with regional experts and other stakeholders who could help in identifying priorities and shaping proposals.

Over the course of several months beginning in February 2014, CANARI used a variety of strategies and methods to support the negotiators’ action-learning priorities and create bridges between them, the technical expertise available in the region and national and regional stakeholders.

2.3. The activities
Activities included:

- facilitation of two one-day retreats in New York, and providing ongoing communication and advice through email and occasional meetings, to support delegates in refining their negotiating positions and identifying priority issues;
- organisation of a series of webinars on critical SDG themes led by regional experts, and sharing the recommendations coming out of them with the negotiators and others through brief reports (see reports on conservation and sustainable use of marine resources oceans and seas, climate change and disaster risk reduction and economic development);
- organisation of a two-day workshop on post-2015 that brought representatives of the CARICOM OWG negotiating team, regional sustainable development experts and other stakeholders together in Trinidad to share perspectives on regional priorities for the SDGs and lessons from previous experiences in global negotiations;
- participation in and presentations at a number of meetings in the region related to post-2015 in order to build awareness and understanding of the SDG process, observe and collect information on Caribbean priorities, and promote constructive engagement with the process;
- facilitation and co-hosting with the Trinidad and Tobago office of the United Nations Development Programme of a meeting to develop and document a civil society position on sustainable development priorities in Trinidad and Tobago, for the purpose of influencing the national government position at the Samoa conference;
- participation by CANARI’s Executive Director in the Samoa conference as a representative of civil society and member of the official Trinidad and Tobago delegation, to better understand how positions are developed and negotiated, and especially the opportunities of non-state actors to influence those processes;
- case study research on how Caribbean SIDS can use regional policy harmonisation to create a bridge between national and global policy arenas and overcome capacity constraints to participation in international processes and agreements, based on experiences from the Eastern Caribbean;
3. What has been learned

3.1. On supporting negotiators
Caribbean UN missions normally rely on their own governments, CARICOM institutions and UN agencies for technical advice and assistance in developing negotiating positions in processes such as post-2015. The relationship between the negotiators and CANARI, an independent non-governmental organisation, is therefore unusual and possibly unprecedented. The IRF2015 retreats that created the first connection between the negotiators and CANARI demonstrated the value of the kind of support CANARI could provide. The interest and strong leadership from a handful of key members of the CARICOM negotiating team drove the relationship forward and created an efficient link between CANARI and the full CARICOM team. CANARI’s standing as a well-established regional source of sustainable development expertise no doubt was a factor in creating trust, which developed further through the two retreats that were held in New York. Unlike some other agencies providing technical advice to countries on the SDGs, CANARI has made a conscious effort to step back from its own agenda and let the negotiators’ priorities steer the process. Despite all these factors that have contributed to a constructive partnership, however, CANARI’s involvement might not have been sought if the CARICOM Task Force had been in place to provide support from a regional Expert Group convened by Caribbean governments.

A review of past Caribbean experiences in international sustainable development processes showed how a CARICOM expert task force provided critical support to regional negotiators from the build-up to the first Rio Summit in 1992 through to the first international SIDS conference. It is therefore unfortunate that attempts to establish a CARICOM Task Force to advise governments on the SIDS and post-2015 sustainable development processes were never fully successful.

Over the course of the relationship with the negotiators, CANARI gained some insights into the forms of support that are most useful and appropriate. The scope of the post-2015 agenda is far too wide for negotiators to become well versed in every issue. They benefit most from brief and clear recommendations on specific positions, with Caribbean-specific evidence to back them up. They also benefit from knowing where they can find reliable regional expertise on the issues they are dealing with, sometimes at short notice. The OWG sessions moved forward at a rapid pace, with each session covering a large number of issues. Even delegates from large country missions were hard-pressed to keep up. For the Caribbean delegates, whose missions are tiny and who therefore must wear many hats, the pressure was only partially eased by working together as a bloc. What the delegates want, and what CANARI attempted to provide, is a kind of a one-stop shop that can rapidly pull together and deliver on demand information and advice on a wide range of technical issues.

3.2. On mobilising and giving voice to civil society
There has been very limited opportunity for civil society to contribute to the development of Caribbean positions on post-2015. Some opportunities were created at regional meetings hosted by UN agencies, including the Caribbean regional preparatory meeting for the SIDS conference in Samoa. CANARI was often invited to present and was able to put forward suggestions based on its work with stakeholders across the Caribbean on issues related to natural resource management and environmental governance. However, representation of civil society at the meetings was limited to a few regional organisations. Ensuring that civil society representatives who do attend these meetings are able to effectively represent the voices of civil society stakeholders across the Caribbean and across sectors remains a
challenge. One government representative from Barbados frequently called for development of a mechanism for systematic and regular meetings of Caribbean civil society on sustainable development issues. This idea is reflected in the outcome statement from the Caribbean regional preparatory meeting.

The civil society national consultation CANARI co-organised and facilitated in Trinidad and Tobago tested the usefulness of a one-day consultation in bringing civil society perspectives together, achieving consensus on sustainable development priorities and influencing government positions. The participants showed considerable interest in the SIDS and post-2015 agendas, had a good understanding of national development needs, and reached consensus on priorities and identify key roles that civil society would play in implementing the post-2015 agenda. However, their knowledge about many issues on the agenda was too limited for them to be able to take well-informed positions. The experience suggests that meaningful civil society engagement requires more than simply convening consultations. Such consultations only have value when the participants are fully prepared and well briefed on the issues and when the full range of civil society perspectives is represented. That implies the need for considerable groundwork by facilitating organisations starting well before any actual consultation.

There are also lessons regarding how the civil society positions that are developed are effectively communicated to and considered by governments. For example, although the civil society positions coming out of the national meeting were supposed to be presented to the Trinidad and Tobago Government by UNDP, there was no evidence that this had been considered by the national delegation to the Samoa conference. In contrast, the statement by the Saint Lucia delegation to Samoa made specific reference to input from civil society and the civil society statement was appended to the official national submission. The experience suggests that civil society should not wait to be invited to contribute but should pro-actively engage, while governments need to be willing to listen to the messages coming from civil society and meaningfully consider these in developing national positions.

At global scale, CANARI engaged with the UN Major Groups\(^1\) during the SIDS inter-regional preparatory meeting and again at the Major Groups event that was convened just ahead of the Samoa conference. CANARI and Caribbean colleagues were able to substantially influence the Major Groups statement at the preparatory meeting and the final outcome document submitted in Samoa, mainly due to limited sustainable development expertise within the Major Group delegations, which are dominated by civil society organisations with interests in women, youth and social issues. Few have expertise in the complex inter-relationships between economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. The experience raised the question of how well suited the UN Major Groups system is to channelling the priorities of national and regional civil society groupings or to effectively contribute to technically complex global sustainable development policy debates. The system seems to be based on an archaic understanding of how civil society is organised and needs to be restructured given new realities, including the vast diversity within the “Non-Governmental” sector.

The experience also raised questions about the influence on negotiators that civil society is able to wield through the Major Group system. Civil society is excluded from closed door negotiating sessions at regional and global meetings and although time is allocated in the formal sessions for presentation of

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\(^1\) Since 1992, the Major Groups structure provides a platform for sectors of society to interact with the UN Member States. The Groups are: Business & Industry; Children & Youth; Farmers; Indigenous Peoples; Local Authorities; Non-Governmental Organisations; Scientific & Technological Community; Women; and Workers & Trade Unions.

statements and interventions by Major Groups, at both the preparatory meeting and in Samoa it was very evident that most of the government delegations were not in the room. With a few notable exceptions, there seemed to be limited interest in engaging with civil society at these meetings. Getting civil society’s views heard and considered may be most effectively done at national or regional than at global level.

3.3. On marshalling regional expertise
Sustainable development experts from Caribbean technical agencies, universities and research institutes have not engaged much on the SDGs or the post-2015 agenda. Few of the meetings and discussions around post-2015 in the region have focused on information requirements, and experts have no obvious channels for making inputs. CANARI tested the usefulness of webinars as a vehicle for pulling together information and expert opinion on post-2015 issues that are particularly important for the Caribbean. The topics addressed by the webinars had been identified as priorities by Caribbean negotiators: conservation and sustainable use of marine resources; Caribbean priorities for economic development; climate change and disaster risk reduction; and terrestrial ecosystems and biodiversity. Each webinar included presentations by three or four experts followed by a focused discussion on implications for the Sustainable Development Goals and targets. The webinars engaged a wide cross-section of participants from across the region, including academia, government, civil society and regional technical agencies. Short briefs were produced outlining policy recommendations and these were submitted to Caribbean negotiators in New York. The webinars proved to be an accessible and cost-effective way of generating and disseminating technical information and recommendations in forms that SDG negotiators and other stakeholders could easily use. They also demonstrated that knowledgeable participants in a well-informed discussion can quickly arrive at consensus on regional priorities.

3.4. On developing national and regional consensus on post-2015 priorities
Ideally, negotiating positions on post-2015 should be derived through structured processes of debate and consensus building among all stakeholders including the broader public. In fact, only a handful of CARICOM countries systematically consulted stakeholders ahead of the OWG process. The consultations in these countries (Grenada, Jamaica and Saint Lucia) were organised by UNDP through “The World We Want” global platform for public engagement on post-2015. The consultations took a standard format, were dominated by UN agendas and their priorities (for example the Sustainable Consumption and Production programme of UNEP) and resulted in lengthy and detailed consultant reports that could not easily be translated into simple recommendations that negotiators could use.

There were also regional consultations organised by UN agencies ahead of the Samoa SIDS conference, but these were also dominated by UN agency agendas (for example the role of the UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean in monitoring implementation of the Mauritius Strategy), did not allow time for meaningful discussion on the priority issues in the negotiations and failed to make the link between the SIDS and post-2015 processes. The consultations may in fact have drained attention, time and human resources away from the post-2015 agenda while resulting in a broad shopping list of issues rather than a specific set of priorities that could have helped negotiators on potential SDG targets.

However, the national reports prepared for the Samoa conference and the interventions by Caribbean delegates there demonstrated that there was in fact a strong consensus on regional sustainable development priorities that could fairly easily be translated into regional positions on the SDGs. Working
together with the CARICOM negotiators, CANARI prepared a short paper summarising this consensus, which the negotiators could use to inform and seek feedback from their governments. The paper defines the key global sustainable development issues for the region and suggests a set of negotiating points for each issue. As a further tool for negotiators and governments, it also includes a table that compares Caribbean positions on these issues with how they have been dealt with by the OWG and in the SAMOA Pathway. While the negotiators found the paper very helpful, they could not make use of it directly as they must take instruction on positions from their governments. The sort of analysis the paper provides can therefore only be useful if it is taken up by governments. As an independent organisation, CANARI’s influence with governments is limited and not as great as that of regional and intergovernmental organisations.

3.5. On negotiating effectively
Caribbean countries have considerable experience in negotiating and participating in international agreements related to sustainable development which can help guide post-2015 negotiating strategies and positions. However, much of this experience is scattered among individuals who are not involved in the current negotiations. By getting former negotiators to reflect on their experiences, CANARI was able to pull together a set of lessons to address the issues that Caribbean countries confront in international processes and link with some of the challenges highlighted in previous sessions. These lessons can be summarised as follows:

1. Governments do not always fully appreciate and can be slow to provide the kinds of support that negotiators require, which include:
   - focal points in capitals to give negotiators an efficient line of communication with their governments and to facilitate the rapid responses required by the fast pace of negotiations;
   - research support to collate relevant information on development priorities and provide it to negotiators in forms that they can quickly absorb and use;
   - responsive review of draft statements developed by negotiators in order to assure that they reflect national and regional policies and priorities;
   - clear and strong declarations of support for positions from political heads and senior technocrats.

2. Because of their small size and weak geopolitical capital, Caribbean negotiators need to draw on every capacity, asset and strategy available to them. They need to take themselves very seriously so that others will take them seriously as well, and they need to be well prepared, both in terms of their own position statements and in knowing the positions being taken by others in order to be able to identify potential allies. They should be willing to take independent and courageous positions, which can demonstrate leadership, build respect from the international community and attract support from other countries.

3. In working together, CARICOM countries may not always hold the same positions, but should always seek to harmonise positions and display unity. CARICOM is in the best position to provide ongoing technical support to negotiators because it can draw on experts from across the region, including within the university system and its own technical agencies.
4. Alliances with other countries beyond the CARICOM grouping are an essential element of effective negotiation. The formal alliances that Caribbean countries are part of, including the G-77, the Group of Latin American and Caribbean Countries and AOSIS, include countries with widely diverse priorities, tend to be dominated by the largest member states and can sometimes force Caribbean countries to take positions that diverge from their own agendas. The solution in these cases is to take different positions when necessary but be prepared to defend the positions taken by others in the alliance.

5. In promoting its key priorities, the region has had success with issue-specific alliances with a broad range of other countries. It has sometimes been possible to draw support from the Caribbean diaspora to forge alliances and promote Caribbean positions with other countries, for example, influencing British positions through the West Indian community in the UK.

6. Another way that the Caribbean group can strengthen its voice is through the international institutions that influence priorities and debates. Caribbean countries have seats on the governing boards of many of these institutions, and if that access is used strategically, can exert influence through these channels.

The case study on policy harmonisation in the Eastern Caribbean showed how regional policy frameworks can help small countries negotiate and participate more effectively in international processes, by providing the basis for collective positions and a roadmap for national and regional action on international commitments. More effective participation in international policy processes can in turn result in greater influence over their outcomes and thus greater relevance to local contexts and priorities. On the other hand, past experience also demonstrates the difficulties that small and resource-constrained countries have in monitoring and reporting on their participation in international development agreements.

4. Implications for effective follow-up and implementation of post-2015 agendas

The action research highlighted several factors that will be critical to assuring the effective uptake and implementation of post-2015 agendas and commitments at regional and national levels, both in the Caribbean and in other developing countries and regions.

The first is the need to pull the various commitments under post-2015 and other regional and international strategies and agendas (such as the SAMOA Pathway in the case of the Caribbean) into each country’s overarching national sustainable development framework. Those frameworks must then direct all implementation and monitoring efforts, by governments, national civil society partners and international organisations. It will be particularly critical that international organisations respect the centrality of national frameworks and strategies, and not crowd out national and regional initiative and leadership with their own priorities and programmes, which can divert and draw down on local capacity.

The Caribbean experience demonstrates the value of regional cooperation and institutions in overcoming the capacity constraints of small states, not only in international negotiations but also through regional frameworks to guide the development of national post-2015 implementation strategies and related policies.
While the importance of civil society and national stakeholder input has been strongly acknowledged by both international agencies and governments in the post-2015 process, the case study revealed how limited and inadequate that engagement has actually been. Governments need to do much more to empower civil society by providing the information and the space to make informed contributions on an ongoing basis. Since governments are themselves not well equipped to work effectively with civil society, they are likely to need to work through trusted intermediaries like CANARI.

Governments also need continuing access to technical expertise in formulating both negotiating positions and national implementation actions. National and regional academic and research institutions can provide much of that support, but they need structures to contribute through, such as task forces and expert groups.

Even with effective regional collaboration and technical support, Caribbean countries and other small states could be overwhelmed by the monitoring, evaluation and reporting burden of their post-2015 commitments. As these issues come onto the UN negotiating agenda, it will be important for small and other resource-constrained states to advocate for monitoring and evaluation frameworks that take realistic account of their limited data collection and management capacity, without turning over responsibility for monitoring and evaluation to international organisations, thereby undermining the development of national systems.

Finally, the case study demonstrates the usefulness of action learning approaches for bringing a diversity of stakeholders together to address a common national or regional challenge. Similar approaches could be employed to support implementation, monitoring and evaluation of national post-2015 strategies.