



# CANARI Policy Brief

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## Building Institutions for Sustainable Development: the Role of Participatory Processes

While progress in achieving the goals of sustainable development has been slow, the concept still has meaning for the Caribbean. Its value lies in its ability to articulate an integrated agenda that encompasses notions of equitable, intergenerational, socio-economic development and good governance. If the vision of sustainable development is to be realised, the concept has to break free of its persistent association with environmental issues. The meaningful involvement of people in sustainable development initiatives and institutions can help bring it into the mainstream.

Sustainable development can only exist within systems of governance that are characterised by accountable and transparent decision-making that provides for the participation of all citizens. It requires the transformation of the political culture to enable the use of democratic, participatory processes in determining how resources are allocated and used. Its aim is equitable economic and social development for all, within culturally acceptable limits and over a sustained time period.

As part of a regional assessment of progress in advance of the World Summit for Sustainable Development, which was held in Johannesburg in September 2002, a seminar was convened on the subject of participatory processes and sustainable development in the Caribbean. The seminar set out to define what sustainable development means for the Caribbean today, how the context has changed since the concept was first introduced ten years ago, and how participatory processes can further the sustainable development agenda. This policy brief shares the main findings and conclusions of the meeting.

### The current situation: much rhetoric, little action

While the countries of the Caribbean have adopted much of the rhetoric of sustainable development, they have implemented few of the measures needed to put it into practice. Although some effective alliances are being formed within civil society locally, at the national level, sustainable development initiatives and responses have largely been ad hoc and marginal to key debates and forums. Short-term considerations tend to take precedence over public policy, which has itself been undermined by centralised and uncoordinated decision-making.

Despite widespread support by governments of the region for the concepts articulated in international statements and agreements such as Agenda 21 and the Small Island Developing States (SIDS) Programme of Action, and despite the efforts of international programmes such as the United Nations Development Programme's Capacity 21, little progress has been made in developing the consultative and collaborative processes and mechanisms that must underpin sustainable development. Clearly there is a need for fresh approaches.

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## Experience to date: progress and obstacles

Future work on sustainable development needs to take account of the progress that has been made and the obstacles that have been encountered. Some of the benchmarks of progress include:

- **Government coordination:** agencies devoted to integrated environmental management have been established in several countries, thereby facilitating intersectoral dialogue and approaches
- **Policy forums:** national policy bodies such as Sustainable Development Councils have been formed in a few countries
- **Civil society involvement:** there has been some civil society participation in planning and policy-making related to environment and development
- **New partnerships:** pressure from civil society has resulted in some effective local and national alliances between governments and non-governmental partners.

Nonetheless, progress has been slowed by the misfit between the philosophy and requirements of sustainable development and the centralised, hierarchical management structures of the region's governments and most other major institutions. These institutions offer little incentive for participation, power sharing, or devolution, all of which are often seen as threats. It may even be said that the prevailing management culture of the region is antithetical to sustainable development.

Action on sustainable development has therefore tended to occur at the periphery, as a result of pressure from external agents such as international assistance organisations or local ones such as citizens groups and NGOs. But even in these cases, efforts are often blocked by a lack of political willingness to support and sustain external initiatives and lack of capacity to implement integrated approaches and participatory methodologies. Generally, the capacity requirements for sustainable development are poorly understood in the region and have been given little attention.

## Changes in the context since Rio

Since the concept of sustainable development gained widespread favour following the U.N. Conference on Environment and Development in 1992, the regional social, economic, political and environmental context has changed. Much of this change is a result of accelerating globalisation, which has reinforced the region's historical powerlessness to set its own economic and social development agenda.

Globalisation's symptoms have included an erosion of local culture and social norms; a high level of foreign control of major economic sectors, especially agriculture and tourism, leading to excessive vulnerability to downturns and shifts in global markets; continued exploitation of natural resources at unsustainable levels to meet the demands of these sectors; and diminished options for national decision-makers, leading to short-term and unsustainable choices.

The globalisation of information and the expansion of telecommunications have helped to increase public awareness of sustainable development concepts, but have also offered up inappropriate models and responses based on experiences from other contexts. In determining its sustainable development agenda, the region must take these impacts into account, while keeping in mind that the history of the region is one of struggle and resistance, and that these are strengths to build on.

Another change over the past ten years has been a growing crisis within the region's NGO community, which suffers from reduced support from external funding sources for institutional development, inadequate technical skills and human resources, and often, an inability to articulate a focussed agenda. NGOs have therefore not assumed the critical role expected of them in sustainable development initiatives.

There are however other recent trends that can have a positive effect on achieving sustainable development goals: these include expanded access to education, improved status of women, and an increasing acceptance of stakeholder participation in natural resource management and decision-making.

## Institutions for sustainable development

One of sustainable development's challenges is that the participatory processes on which it depends are complex and require institutional arrangements that equitably bring together diverse groupings of individuals and organisations to work towards a shared vision. In this context, institutions might be defined as the structures and processes that individuals and groups use to negotiate the rules and norms that guide their own behaviour or that of society. Institutions may be formal or informal; inclusive or exclusive; local, national or international. Formal institutions, whether those of the State or of civil society, tend to evolve into forms that are rigid, hierarchical and undemocratic. It is therefore not surprising that many of the institutions that have been employed to further the cause of sustainable development have instead undermined its progress.

Contexts vary and there can be no institutional blueprint; however some characteristics of institutions for sustainable development can be identified:

- They bring individuals and organisations together in common cause
- They confront power imbalances in society and provide an equal voice for all stakeholders
- They clarify the roles of different actors
- They provide a legal framework for collaboration and exchange within and between sectors
- They equitably and efficiently allocate responsibility and authority among management partners
- They build on and respect experience, strengths and capacities of all partners
- They monitor, review and evaluate their processes and structures
- They employ consensual approaches to decision-making and managing conflicts
- They adopt an open approach and are accountable

Since such qualities can represent a threat to those holding power, formal efforts to restructure institutions for sustainable development have generally been blocked. While dispersed, ad hoc initiatives as well as "guerrilla tactics" and small transfers of authority to local or informal institutions have made cracks in these barriers, the lack of formal structures for collaboration and power transfer remains a chronic limiting factor in achieving sustainable development. The need for action at multiple levels means there is no single solution and institutional arrangements for sustainable development are necessarily messy.

### Policy for sustainable development

The relationship between public policy and sustainable development practice is not clear. There are examples of sustainable development initiatives that have taken root in seemingly hostile policy environments and others that have failed despite apparently supportive policy.

The context for sustainable development policy in the region comprises a complex mix of local, national, regional and international factors that can have both positive and negative impacts. They include:

- **globalisation:** while it is debatable whether this is a new phenomenon, the impacts on policy of increasingly mobile capital (human and economic), the growth of global institutions such as the World Trade Organisation and International Monetary Fund, and a trend towards standardisation (e.g. of norms, expectations and regulations) are a reality;
- **politicisation:** public policy initiatives are owned or claimed by political parties, making it difficult for civil society to participate in policy processes without being associated with partisan politics;
- **privatisation:** the debate on the role of the State in providing public goods and services is long-standing. Concepts of deregulation, decentralisation, devolution and delegation should be seen against this backdrop;
- **scale:** the small size of public administrations in the region encourages linkages and integrated policy;
- **diversity:** small size should not mask the Caribbean's diversity. While this is one of the region's sources of wealth, it has also impeded development of regional solutions to challenges;

## Requirements for Effective Participatory Processes

The lack of capacity to implement effective participatory processes has been a major constraint to sustainable development. Some measures to increase capacity include the following:

- Creation of legal frameworks and instruments that set the context and conditions for participation and co-management
- Mechanisms to permit regular experience sharing, both locally and regionally
- Greater involvement of the business sector in sustainable development debates and approaches, in order to draw on the special skills and knowledge that reside there
- Processes of institutional reform, to help government agencies, NGOs and stakeholder groups involved in sustainable development become more inclusive, equitable, accountable, self-reflective, and visionary
- Increased transparency in decisions regarding the allocation of resources, including provision for civil society participation in government budgeting processes
- More attention to and application of tested methodologies for participatory planning and management

- **interdependence:** the trend towards integration reflects recognition of the growing interdependence of territories in the region, partially as a result of globalisation.

Under the framework of the Capacity 21 programme, some countries have made progress on developing indicators of sustainable development, and this and other advances should be built upon in the development of national policies.

Existing policies should be subject to review and reappraisal in the light of the changed context described earlier. These processes of review should draw on perspectives and experiences from a broad range of

interests so that sustainable development begins to have meaning for people. This will mean collaboration between the State and civil society in public policy formulation, which will require the skilled application of participatory processes and methodologies.

A broader policy outlook could help move sustainable development on from its current correlation with environmental issues towards mainstream debates on development directions. Actions could include making sustainable development an entitlement. This approach would put it on governance agendas by addressing the rights of citizens at a time when global forces are undermining them.

## Recommendations for Furthering Regional Progress on Sustainable Development

- There are no blueprints or prescriptions for sustainable development institutions. Processes, structures and mechanisms must make reference to local conditions and contexts.
- Sustainable development institutions should build on existing capacities, strengths and experience. They must not undermine effective organisations and initiatives that are already in place.
- Interpretations of sustainable development must look beyond the environment so that the integrated and holistic ideals of the concept can be realised.
- Participatory reviews and reappraisals of policies and processes can promote learning from experience, share information and best practice examples, and mobilise support for sustainable development.
- The skills and methods that are required to foster sustainable development include negotiation, planning, communication, stakeholder analysis, conflict management and participatory research.
- Processes such as visioning, strategic planning and networking can help to transform aspects of institutions (their cultures, political systems and structures) that are currently antithetical to sustainable development.

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