

‘Building back better’ in the Caribbean means addressing multiple risks at the local level

As the world celebrates International Day for Disaster Risk Reduction on October 13, 2020, CANARI’s disaster expert, Candice Ramkissoon, explores how the COVID-19 threat is exacerbating risks from biodiversity loss and climate change being faced by poor and vulnerable communities in the Caribbean. Efforts need to focus on scaling up community-led actions and influencing local plans and budgets to prioritise the needs of those most vulnerable.

Multiple risks are threatening Caribbean poor and vulnerable communities

The COVID-19 pandemic is an existential threat in the Caribbean and the socio-economic impacts are especially being felt by poor and vulnerable communities. The United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (UNECLAC) has already [projected](#) that COVID-19 will result in the worst recession in the region in a century, causing a 9.1% contraction in regional GDP in 2020.

But some are seeing the COVID-19 pandemic as relatively small in comparison to the existing crises caused by climate change and biodiversity loss as key issues. Each of these three intertwined challenges is disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable and driving rising inequality.



Photo credit: Graeme MacKay (mackaycartoons.net)

The added challenge of COVID-19 is a stark reminder for some, and has forced recognition for others, of the complexity of multiple risks and threats facing vulnerable and marginalised communities. Having faced the fury of monster Hurricanes Irma and Maria three years ago, Caribbean nations such as Dominica and Antigua and Barbuda fear repeat impacts, and have since been determined to ‘build back better’ and put

measures in place to ensure local people can piece their lives back together, one basic need at a time. But this year, the concern is doubled – people are grappling with how evacuation and sheltering, displacement, physical damage to homes and other infrastructure, and any significant impact to livelihoods caused by storms, particularly in coastal areas, could leave Caribbean communities and families more vulnerable to the COVID-19 disease and its impacts. All of this in a year with a hurricane season so active that the list of A-Z names has already been exhausted!

Many have been feeling that COVID-19 and the policy responses to it have created barriers to earning an income outside the home, leading to greater poverty, hunger and inequality. Reduced operating hours, quarantines and physical distancing measures are promoted as necessities to help curb the rapid spread of the coronavirus and save lives. But these have resulted in closures, especially of small businesses, and are leading to job losses (11.6 million more unemployed in 2020 than 2019 in Latin America and the Caribbean, according to [UNECLAC](#)) and overall reduction in income. No doubt, the effects are being more intensely felt by the broad strata of the population that are already living in or vulnerable to poverty.

In the context of multiple threats and rising inequalities, it is critical that policy and practice for COVID-19 recovery must focus on [pro-poor, green and resilient approaches to ‘building back better.’](#)

Building local resilience is key

As Caribbean small island developing states (SIDS) shut their borders in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and isolated their small populations, the importance of local resilience and local level solutions by and for local actors has been dramatically highlighted.

While there is no one-size-fits all strategy for becoming resilient, in my work at the Caribbean Natural Resources Institute ([CANARI](#)), we have always been exploring local solutions – particularly [ways that nature's 'services' can support local communities](#) to adapt to impacts of climate change and natural disasters and give them economic opportunities through [nature-based livelihoods and entrepreneurship](#) to build their local resilience. In the Caribbean there are also [several examples](#) of how this is working in practice and how local communities are using local knowledge and nature-based solutions to adapt to climate change and disasters and develop economic opportunities.

At the 14th International Conference on Community-based Adaptation to Climate Change ([CBA14](#)) hosted by the International Institute for Environment and Development ([IIED](#)) which I attended, local



Natural resource users such as fisherfolk who are already impacted by hurricanes annually in the Caribbean, now deal with the added stress of COVID-19 on their livelihoods. Photo credit: Candice Ramkissoon

examples were shared from across Asia and Africa on what grassroots communities were doing to address the inter-twined COVID-19-biodiversity-climate crisis. The solutions were quite simple – most people had returned to traditional ways of living, growing their own food to survive and using traditional herbs and medicines to strengthen their immune systems. But there was also focus by community-based organisations and women's groups on engaging local governments in dialogues to provide communities with access to local funds and programmes for scaling up community-led actions and influencing local plans and budgets to prioritise their needs and issues. Their solutions were steeped in local knowledge and decades of practical knowledge working with their

environment. The message is clear – **building resilience requires listening to community voices and counting local priorities in decision making and delivering solutions.**

'Building back better' for local resilience

So, what are three recommendations for Caribbean leaders to build resilience to the inter-twined COVID-19-biodiversity-climate crises?

1. **Ensure civil society and local communities have a voice in integrated risk management and decision making.** In the face of multiple threats, integrated risk management is needed that is inclusive, bottom-up and participatory. For communities, having the means to adapt to the ongoing crises and multiple threats is not just a policy objective—it's a matter of survival. Therefore, having a say in what measures are being put in place is critical for a just, equitable and people-centred approach. Local communities should mobilise and advocate for their needs,

and this should be welcomed by governments and other development partners, who need to strengthen mechanisms to engage and support local people to have an input in decisions affecting their lives. The lack of structured mechanisms for effective and consistent stakeholder engagement is no longer appropriate or acceptable. The [Escazú Agreement](#) provides a useful framework of principles and standards on access to information, public participation and justice in environmental matters in Latin America and the Caribbean which can be applied to resilience building.

2. **Strengthen local governance systems and support for community level action.** It is critical to engage and support civil society and local people in contributing to practical actions for recovery and building resilience. Why? These are the first responders in their communities during any crisis. It is here that local governments play a role in creating and brokering vital connections between national governments and needs on the ground. A recent [civil society spotlight report](#) on Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 13 in Trinidad and Tobago called for local government to better integrate climate action into their agenda and include definitive actions in their work programme for building overall local resilience. This is needed across the Caribbean and means allocating resources including information, warm bodies, finances, capacity building/training etc. to support community-led action. A new [project](#) being implemented by CANARI has recognised this need and is working with government partners in several Caribbean nations on means to strengthen civil society readiness to access climate finance that will support local solutions. Other [work](#) by CANARI is looking at ways to build capacity of local communities, associated livelihoods and ecosystems as a critical priority to reduce impacts from hurricanes and climate extremes and speed up recovery.
3. **Amplify civil society's role in implementation, monitoring and learning.** If the mantra is 'all hands on deck' to address this global emergency, the Caribbean needs to do much more to engage all actors at all levels in meaningful collaborations to co-develop and co-implement solutions that will meet the needs of people on the ground. Further, the watchdog role of civil society is critical to ensure that governments and others fulfil commitments and implement strategies as agreed and to deliver the Sustainable Development Goals ([SDGs](#)) for people, planet and prosperity and ensuring that no one is left behind. Monitoring by civil society also needs to assess results being delivered and lessons being learnt. Unless every crisis is addressed with a long-term learning approach, we are doomed to repeat past mistakes. COVID-19 has shown our collective vulnerability and identified serious challenges which have not yet been addressed. Applying governance responses that are participatory will ensure that we keep on track toward sustainable development despite current challenges, and that policy responses are evolving to realistically meet the needs of people on the ground.

While the challenges seem daunting, and even though we are so vulnerable, I remain hopeful. Necessity is often the mother of invention and I am confident in how innovative, creative and resilient Caribbean people can be in developing and delivering local solutions to address global problems.