1. Introduction

The Caribbean Natural Resources Institute (CANARI) coordinated the implementation of a four-year (2017-2021) project titled Powering Innovations in Civil Society and Enterprises for Sustainability in the Caribbean (PISCES) in partnership with the Caribbean Coastal Area Management Foundation (C-CAM), the Caribbean Network of Fisherfolk Organisations (CNFO), the Environmental Awareness Group (EAG), the Fondation pour la Protection de la Biodiversité Marine (FoProBiM), the Saint Lucia National Trust (SLNT) and Sustainable Grenadines Inc (SusGren). The project was implemented in nine Caribbean countries: The Bahamas, The Commonwealth of Dominica, Grenada, Haiti, Jamaica, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Trinidad and Tobago.

The project was funded by the European Union and aimed to support innovative actions by Caribbean civil society and coastal community small and micro-enterprises for conservation of marine and coastal biodiversity and development of sustainable and resilient livelihoods.

Component 4 of the project focused on using innovative approaches to bring together environmental, social and business thinking to strengthen formal and informal community small and micro enterprises (SMEs) based on small scale fisheries and ecotourism to build resilience and enhance economic benefits to rural communities, particularly women. The project aimed to build the capacity of at least 15 SMEs across the 10 project countries. The intention was to not only deliver improved financial results for the SMEs, but also enhance their delivery of environmental and social benefits, as well as reduce their vulnerability to climate change.

Thirteen SMEs and 10 Mentors were selected across nine of the project countries (all except Antigua and Barbuda).

2. Selection and support of SME Mentors

CANARI rolled out a rigorous process to appoint the 10 Mentors, understanding that critical to the success of any Mentorship programme are the qualities and characteristics of the Mentors themselves. The Mentor selection process involved:

i. Developing Mentor Terms of Reference (TOR): CANARI developed a Terms of Reference (TOR) for SME Mentors (which was later revised after the training workshop with Mentors based on their input) as well as a Mentoring Strategy and Frequently Asked Questions guide.

ii. Inviting nominations: Using the TOR, CANARI invited the project Partners and other in-country stakeholders, as well as the non-profit Centre of Excellence for Sustainable Livelihoods (CoESL) to submit nominations for persons to serve as SME Mentors. CoESL has

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1 CoESL is a civil society organisation based in Barbados and working around and beyond the Caribbean to help entrepreneurs, social entrepreneurs, community-based professionals of Caribbean and African heritage, to become entrepreneurial, resilient citizens.
a long track record and network of SME mentors throughout the Caribbean and provided CANARI with a pool of recommended Mentors from the ten PISCES target countries.

iii Inviting applications: CANARI directly invited each nominee to apply to the Mentorship programme by submitting their CV and filling in an application form (Attachment 16).

iv Reviewing applications: CANARI reviewed each application and CV to ensure that all applicants met the Mentor criteria and were willing to work within the TOR. An interview with the potential Mentors was also conducted. The interview’s intention was to determine cultural fit and willingness to commit to the process for the duration of the PISCES project.

v Appointing Mentors: CANARI sent each selected Mentor an appointment letter.

CANARI selected SME Mentors from each of the target countries based on their experience, competence, skills, ability and suitability. The criteria used looked at the Mentor’s expertise in three main areas – enterprise development, business management, market assessment and development – as well as willingness to commit to the process for the duration of the PISCES project.

Two in-person Mentor training workshops were facilitated by CANARI over the period. The first was conducted in Grenada in May 2018 and oriented Mentors to the context for nature-based SMEs and CANARI’s tools and techniques for building capacity of nature-based enterprises. Workshop sessions looked specifically at general qualities of mentors and mentoring SMEs in the Caribbean islands and used a site visit to explore the unique characteristics of nature-based enterprises. Mentors discussed the role and TOR for Mentors, the criteria and process they would use for selection of the target SMEs, and the steps that would be involved in the mentoring process under the PISCES project.

The second training workshop was not originally planned under the project, but by early 2019 CANARI recognised that it was needed to provide the Mentors additional support. This second workshop was held in April/May 2019 in Trinidad and Tobago, and focused on deepening the understanding of Mentors of their role and the planned approach under the project, building Mentors’ capacity to use two key CANARI tools (the Local Blue-Green Enterprise Radar and the Value Chain Approach for Climate Proofing), reviewing a detailed capacity assessment tool which Mentors would apply with their mentee SMEs, and reviewing and refining the process for capacity building of SMEs under the PISCES project, including using microgrants and catalysing partnerships through national expos. The workshop also included an overview of the timeline, activities and milestones relevant for the mentoring programme under the PISCES project.

At the second workshop, SME Mentors said that they still needed more training in using the Value Chain Analysis climate proofing tool with SMEs. CANARI planned to do this by sharing more detailed materials which were being developed under another project. But this was significantly delayed, and a training webinar was eventually only held in December 2020. As part of the webinar, two Mentors who had applied the tool under another CANARI project shared their experiences.

A CANARI staff member was assigned to coordinate and support the work of the Mentors. A WhatsApp group was created and used for group communication. Mentors were also engaged individually via WhatsApp calls and messages as well as group webinars. The coaching support provided to the Mentors by CANARI was generally for:

- Questions on the tools provided by CANARI
- Brainstorming and idea generation on mentoring the SMEs
- Review of project reports and documents
- Support with Micro Grant applications
CANARI also shared information on the project and other opportunities for networking and capacity building with SME Mentors via email throughout the project.

At the start of the project, Mentors each received a small honorarium as well as funds to support travel and other expenses for meeting with the SMEs. These expenses were highly variable across the countries. The five Mentors who facilitated national expos also each received a small honorarium as well as funds to support expenses for the expos.

Mentors also supported each other. To a limited extent, Mentors also networked with each other during the project building on the relationships they had established during the two in-person training workshops. For example, during the facilitation of the national expos, Mentors collaborated with each other via brainstorming sessions and support in execution and attendance of the various events.

### 3. Selection of the target SMEs

CANARI drafted criteria for selection of the target SMEs and these were discussed with the SME Mentors at the training workshop in May 2018 before four essential and three desirable criteria were finalised.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Essential criteria</th>
<th>Desirable criteria</th>
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<tr>
<td>Located in the 10 project countries - Antigua and Barbuda, The Bahamas, The</td>
<td>SME based on the sustainable use of natural resources (e.g., fish, corals, mangroves,</td>
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<tr>
<td>Commonwealth of Dominica, Grenada, Haiti, Jamaica, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint</td>
<td>shrubs, etc.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Trinidad and Tobago</td>
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<tr>
<td>Located in and around MMAs/MPAs within the 10 project countries.</td>
<td>6. SME has been operational for at least one year.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Available and willing to be part of the PISCES project (January 2018 – December 2020)</td>
<td>7. The SME should be a collective or cluster initiative.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Willing to work with a micro and small enterprise mentor and in-country project</td>
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<td>partners where they are available.</td>
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For the six countries with a PISCES project in-country Partner (i.e. Grenada, Haiti, Jamaica, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines), the Partner was part of the selection process.

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2 Note there was a project extension to March 2021 later granted by the EU.
CANARI developed an online survey (using Survey Monkey) and sent it to the 10 SME Mentors as well as project Partners and other in-country stakeholders to elicit nominations for nature-based SMEs to target under the Action. Sixteen nominated SMEs were submitted to CANARI from across the 10 target countries. CANARI screened the submissions and collected further information from nominators and the SMEs where needed to create a shortlist of those that met the criteria. Out of this process, 13 SMEs were selected across the 10 project countries to target for support under the project, including three cooperatives and one umbrella non-profit supporting a collective of SMEs with more than half owned, managed or staffed by women. The SMEs are based on small scale fisheries, ecotourism, apiculture, seamoss farming and hydroponics.

4. SME capacity building process

a) Capacity needs assessment

At the commencement of the PISCES programme, an initial assessment of the targeted SMEs was conducted by Mentors and captured general information on the SME. Following on after a year of engagement between mentors and SMEs, a detailed capacity assessment was conducted. This used three CANARI tools:

1. SME Capacity Needs Assessment tool, which gives an overview of the organisation’s strengths and needs (knowledge, skills, technology, relationships, etc.) and provides a platform for mentors to assess the organisation and its operations and suggests a way forward which can develop the organisation in a holistic way
2. The Local Green-Blue Enterprise Radar, a tool developed by CANARI which focuses on self-assessment of an enterprise in their delivery of triple-bottom line benefits (economic, social and environmental) and good governance
3. The assessment of climate vulnerabilities and identification of climate proofing strategies using the Value Chain Analysis

The detailed capacity assessment served as a baseline which included the Mentor’s assessment of the SME’s strengths as well as recommendations for building the capacity of the mentee SME and a plan of action to support achievement of these recommendations over the life of the PISCES project.

It was discovered that the SMEs were all at different stages of their business life cycle:

- There were a few start-up SMEs that were not legally registered, conducted work on a project-by-project basis, and/ or have weak policies, procedures, or systems in place to facilitate sustainable growth.
- There were young and emerging SMEs had written business plans to guide the organisation’s growth and development but did not put performance management indicators in place.
- There were several SMEs that required the strengthening of governance structures.
- There were a few growing or expanding SMEs which had formal administrative, financial management and human resource management systems in place but limited plans in place for long-term financial sustainability.

The assessment tools were intended to be used in follow-up monitoring and the final evaluation against the baseline to assess change in capacity of the SME over the project.

b) Capacity building strategy
In addition to the individual plans for capacity building of each SME, the capacity needs assessments were also used to develop an overall capacity building strategy under the project, which would be delivered through work by the SME Mentors and micro grants support under the PISCES project’s Caribbean Sea Innovation Fund (CarSIF). Across the target SMEs, the top five specific priority capacity needs were identified as:

1. Capacity building in business development for leaders of the SMEs
2. Business plan development
3. Financial record keeping and accounting
4. Developing a marketing strategy
5. Use of technology and social media

The strategy for addressing some of the SMEs’ highest priority capacity needs therefore used a multidimensional approach supported by the PISCES project, the Mentors, and the SMEs themselves. Implementation of the strategy required action at the following levels:

**Support for SME Mentors**
1. Coaching and support to the SME Mentors to deliver capacity building, via coaching by CANARI staff, webinars and training for Mentors, provision of other tools and open communication
2. Coordination and collaboration with other SME Mentors within the programme to encourage peer-to-peer coaching

**Capacity building of SMEs**
3. Mentors coaching the SMEs in specific areas depending on their needs
4. A small grant programme (CarSIF) to address identified needs and assist in getting the SMEs to a more independent place, as well as, assistance with execution of parts of their business or marketing plans

c) **Capacity building activities**

Over the project, the mentoring process used by Mentors generally encompassed:

- Having initial meetings with the SMEs for scoping and relationship building
- Conducting the capacity needs assessment with SMEs, with reports submitted to CANARI
- Applying the Local Green-Blue Enterprise Radar with the SMEs, with the completed Radar diagrams submitted to CANARI
- Developing agreement with the SMEs on priority areas for capacity strengthening and a plan for how this would be done together
- Conducting periodic follow-up and coaching with the SMEs to address capacity needs
- At the end of the project re-applying the capacity assessment and the Radar tools and completing a final evaluation form as part of the final evaluation with the SMEs, with reports submitted to CANARI

The approach to capacity building was tailored to each SME, and different for all. Generally, it involved the SME Mentors meeting regularly and working with the SMEs to apply the Local Green-Blue Enterprise Radar and the Value Chain Analysis for climate proofing, coach them with development of business skills, systems and plans, developing proposals to access CarSIF grants, facilitating national expos and meetings with stakeholders to help catalyse partnerships for the SME.
Eight of the SMEs benefitted from a micro grant administered under the project via CarSIF. Although this opportunity was available to all the target SMEs, and was non-competitive, not all the SMEs decided to apply. These micro grants specifically supported priority capacity strengthening needs identified as part of the initial assessment with the SMEs.

Mentors also facilitated peer exchanges among four of the SMEs doing sea moss farming – Liamugia Sea Moss Group, LaBaye Alternative Livelihood Organisation (previously W Andrew and Associates Sea Moss Enterprise, Mayreau Explorers Multipurpose Co-operative Limited and Ashton MultiPurpose Co-operative Limited (AMCO) – and with other sea moss farmers.

Towards the end of the project, five of the Mentors facilitated national expos which aimed to showcase the work of the SME and stimulate development of partnerships with key stakeholders in the country. These expos were conceptualised and implemented entirely by the Mentors, who were creative in using a variety of approaches given different COVID-19 restrictions in each country. Expos were done through: development of a video which was launched via a Facebook Live session; a webinar featuring a presentation by the SME supported by a PowerPoint photostory; an in-person meeting of the Board of the SME and key partners; a fair showcasing products of the SME targeting high level government officials and the public, which also was used as a fundraising opportunity; and development of a video and photostory which could be used by the SME in its outreach to potential partners.

Audio journeys documenting the experiences of five SME mentees were also developed. Interviews were conducted with the SMEs, their Mentor, CANARI, and other partners in some cases and a podcast series was developed.

Although initially a lot of the engagement by Mentors was done face-to-face, this became difficult in Haiti due to the political crisis and later in all countries due to national restrictions put in place for COVID-19. Capacity building activities moved to primarily virtual engagement strategies and success was mixed. WhatsApp seemed to be the easiest and quickest virtual method of communication as everyone had a mobile phone.

5. **Results on SME strengthening**

At the end of the project, the SME Mentors conducted final assessments with their SME mentees, compared with the capacity baseline conducted and priorities for capacity building identified at the start of the project. Mentors completed an evaluation form to document changes, lessons and recommendations.

Overall, several of the SMEs made progress in addressing the capacity building priorities identified in the baseline, for example in strengthening marketing, financial record keeping and accounting, developing partnerships, identifying new revenue streams and value-added opportunities. Strengthened capacity of the leaders of the enterprises was a common feature. However, many areas were still to be addressed.

6. **Lessons on SME strengthening**

   **a) More attention should be paid to selecting SME mentees:** More needs to be done to understand if an SME would fit, if they would benefit, whether they are committed and have the
capacity to engage, if they are open to learning and growing. You can’t force someone to improve if they do not have the will to progress in that direction.

b) **A gendered approach to selecting and engaging SMEs is needed:** Working with women-led SMEs can produce rich data to assist in a more targeted focused approach to women-led SMEs focusing on natural resources in the future. Gender aggregated data collection and decision making is needed.

c) **The SME must have capacity to engage:** Where the leader of the SME has strong capacity, it made mentoring much easier and the Mentor could operate at a different level with less hand holding. Having access to multiple people in the SME is important especially where capacity is lower or mixed, and if the SME undergoes a change in leadership during the process.

d) **Detailed capacity assessments and plans were useful:** The capacity assessment tools provided an overview of where the SME stood at the start of the project and development of a roadmap to build capacity over the time of the project. The detailed action plan provided a step-by-step approach to achieving the SME’s capacity building goals and encouraged accountability.

e) **SMEs benefitted:** SMEs learnt and grew through the process and were able to develop new ideas about how to strengthen their business. In some cases, the process helped them to think of their business more like a business (rather than like a non-profit organisation) – it helped them to start to develop a business mindset. Implementing the micro grant project built confidence in the SMEs. Relationships with partners were happening organically but the expos were also useful in strengthening existing relationships and catalysing new relationships. The expos also helped to bring members of the SME together to analyse challenges and agree on a way forward.

f) **Practical tools are effective with SMEs:** The tools provided by CANARI were practical and useful. In particular, the Local Green-Blue Enterprise Radar was simple and user-friendly for the SMEs and highlighted in a very practical and clear way what a SME’s strengths are and what are the areas for improvement. It was useful to assess a baseline and the SME can use it to monitor its progress over time. Its simplicity and graphic presentation made it easy for the Mentors to connect with the SMEs. The Radar helped SMEs to put their ideas on paper. This and the value chain analysis helped the SMEs to understand their business better. But tools must be in the local language, and translation into Haitian Creole was important to be able to use it with SMEs in Haiti.

g) **Micro grants are valuable in capacity building:** The micro grants were useful in supporting concrete actions for the SME to improve their business, which were a start of a longer journey of capacity building. More funds would have been useful. Helping an SME to access finance and build networks is important for continued support for the SME’s development and should be part of the mentoring process. SMEs feel left out a lot by support and regulatory agencies so ongoing capacity building that is targeted, tailored and accessible to them is important.

h) **Micro grants should be tailored to the requirements and capacity of the SMEs:** The project design meant that each target SME was eligible to receive the same size micro grant, but a tailored approach may be more effective. Some SMEs would have been able to do more with
more funds, while other struggled to spend the funds that they were given, and some did not even apply for funds.

i) **Capacity building of SMEs is a long-term process:** Micro enterprises need 7-10 years to really become sustainable, so long-term and sustained support is needed. Informal approaches can work. Virtual methods are good but can’t always work given the capacity of the SME (with access to equipment and high-speed internet); in-person methods are better.

j) **SME associations focus on collective benefits:** Some SMEs choose to stick together and work together; they see collective success as more important for their community than individual success. But this can make decision-making more challenging, especially when the association is spread across several communities.

k) **Strengthen engagement of partners from the start:** Allow for greater interaction and involvement of key stakeholders particularly finance institutions and government agencies from the start. The expo was done at the end of the project and proved to be successful method of bringing stakeholders together, sharing lessons and making onward connections. Engaging organisations which are already a part of CANARI’s network can also provide opportunities for sharing lessons for continuity, consistency and capacity building. Having stakeholders involved in a more sustained, intentional relationship from the inception of the project may be an option for open dialogue, innovative solutions and increased awareness.

l) **Hybrid social/green enterprises require tailored approaches:** Many of the SMEs were operating as a hybrid social/green enterprise, not as traditional for-profit enterprises. This requires a specialised approach to capacity building and training for Mentors in this area.

m) **Flexibility and a tailored approach are key to support SMEs at different stages of development:** The SMEs that were assessed under the PISCES project were at various stages of business development with some being young, start-up SMEs and others being more mature in some respects. As such, this regional capacity building strategy recognised that there was a strong need to be open minded and flexible in the approach to both mentorship and reporting. It was also noted that the PISCES project did not have all the resources or mandate to address all the capacity needs identified in the SMEs.

n) **Understanding and planning for risks is key for continuity:** The capacity building plans did not factor in the risk of life events which would disrupt the process. Over the course of the project, for example, natural disasters such as hurricanes affected one of the businesses in a meaningful way. The capacity building plan must be flexible enough to allow for these types of risks and disruptions.

o) **Mechanisms needs to be in place to address misfits, conflicts and grievances:** Provisions ought to be built in for mentors and mentees that are not a fit to the process, cannot continue or may be having difficulties. Grievance and conflict management mechanisms need to be in place and used as needed.

p) **Long-term sustained support is needed:** Although progress was made with strengthening the target SMEs, continued support is needed to be able to build on the progress made and address priorities that were identified but not yet addressed. SMEs in rural areas seem to take a longer
time to adapt, adjust and execute due to commitments, capacity, and community issues. Particularly because the SMEs were at different stages in their development, this meant that time must be built in for developing trust. More developed leaders and businesses are more open at the onset, whereas SMEs that are less formal need time to trust the Mentor and the process. A good foundation was built with several SMEs that can be built upon.

7. Lessons on mentoring

a) Selecting the ‘right’ Mentors is critical and challenging: Using an experienced partner to assist with the preliminary selection of Mentors assisted the process. Shortlisted mentors were recommended based on their track record. This allowed for a pool of Mentors to be shortlisted and interviewed in a shorter time frame. Finding a Mentor without partnering with an agency on the ground who also worked with mentors or have had experience with mentors is challenging and time consuming. However, the selection criteria and process for Mentor selection process should be reviewed to determine whether the method chosen could be improved.

b) Mentoring of nature-based SMEs requires immersion: The basic principles of mentoring also apply to nature-based SMEs. But engaging nature-based SMEs may require Mentors to work with them outdoors where they work due to the type of enterprises. Spending time with them on site (for example at sea) and seeing how they conduct their business builds a better understanding of the mentee’s approach and the nature of the enterprise. Mentoring the SMEs requires an innovative and sometimes immersive approach.

c) The Mentor-mentee relationship is central: Building trust is essential. The Mentor can build a very close relationship with the mentee so that they feel like family. The most important thing is to listen, not judge. The Mentor acts as an interpreter to help ‘translate’ the SME’s ideas into a ‘language’ that can be communicated to support agencies, etc. Mentors ask relevant questions to help the SME think through issues or explore ideas they otherwise may not have thought of. The Mentor acts as a sounding board for ideas. Communication with the SMEs is often challenging and can be frustrating for the Mentor. It is not the responsibility of the Mentor to push the mentee; it must be some sort of reciprocal relationship. The Mentor should not be pushing the mentee in a direction they do not want to go. In general, the Mentor needs to have some background in the type of business to be effective.

d) Mentors need more capacity building and support: Technical training to mentors provided the mentors with the tools and the confidence to support the needs of the SMEs. But more capacity building and support was needed to improve the coaching, mentoring and peer exchange conducted by the mentors to support the SMEs. Including on using CANARI’s tools and methodologies. Provide financial (honorarium or otherwise) and other support and incentives appropriate to the demands and expectations, especially over a long project. Support is also needed to cover the costs of the mentoring programme, including for travel and meetings. Site visits to the SMEs, makes a massive difference in mentoring micro and small businesses, particularly community-based and rural-based businesses. Provisions ought to be made to support this as part of a mentoring programme for SMEs.

e) Much stronger coordination by CANARI is needed for an effective mentoring programme: CANARI also needs to more closely monitor activities and progress, step in where additional
support is needed, manage conflicts, and improve assessment and reporting. A CANARI ‘super mentor’ can provide critical coaching support to Mentors.

q) **Building capacity through mentorship for SMEs, particularly the ones using natural resources is a delicate balance between advising and participatory decision making:** There is no “one size fits all” and not all theoretical solutions can work in every environment. It is also a case of using what is available in the present moment and having the patience and tenacity to last through the challenges which undoubtedly presents itself through red tape, cumbersome regulations, and long-standing habits, just to name a few.

f) **Letting Mentors design a tailored approach is effective:** The Mentors designed very different approaches to the national expos which were effective for their context and the needs and capacity of their mentee SMEs. Allocating pools of funds which can be flexibly accessed by Mentors to use in the mentoring programme can be effective. However, ensuring transparency and accountability remains critical.

g) **Resilience needs to be built into the mentoring programme:** Mentors may be affected due to external issues or personal challenges impacting their ability to provide mentoring over the life of the project. When in-country Mentors resign it is very disruptive to the mentoring programme and having more than one Mentor per country is one strategy that can be in place to provide resilience and continue to support the SME. Where CANARI had to do this remotely it was very challenging.