

The Caribbean We Want:

Civil society recommendations for transformative pathways to Caribbean sustainable development

March 2024

Why the SIDS4 conference matters to civil society

It has been 30 years since the first UN International Conference on SIDS, and nearly 10 since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Yet the Caribbean's progress towards sustainable development has been discouraging. The effects of climate change are accelerating, and its long-term trajectory is increasingly uncertain. Global recessions, natural disasters and COVID have left enormous economic fallout. Inequality has increased as political and economic power and control over resources has become concentrated in the hands of elites and corporations. Opportunities for environmentally sustainable development have diminished as natural resources are misused and degraded through poor development decisions necessitated by the fiscal constraints of Caribbean governments. Obstacles to progress are grounded in both current political and economic realities and the region's incomplete process of decolonisation, which perpetuates power imbalances, distrust of open dialogue and citizen participation, and a devaluation and extractive attitude towards the environment.

Sustainable development is the vision that unites and inspires Caribbean civil society. We look to the SIDS4 conference to bring about a renewed commitment to achieving that vision. **We know the task is too big for governments acting alone or even together. It must be a collective effort, one that we are ready and able to be a part of.** In this paper we highlight four major unmet challenges of the 2030 Agenda and make recommendations for how we can address them together to achieve a green, just, resilient and prosperous future.

The four challenges

Bring civil society perspectives into the room. The expertise, experience and local knowledge of civil society organisations (CSOs) contribute to sustainable development progress in major and often unacknowledged ways. Yet CSO participation in development decisions and initiatives remains mostly a lost opportunity, despite lip service to **whole of society approaches**. The SIDS4 conference, with its tiny and rigidly controlled space for civil society input, provides an illustration of how CSOs are routinely marginalised.

Transition to an economy that is both green and just. The dream of a **green economy** that offers environmental sustainability while benefiting local people and communities has fallen by the wayside. The discourse for SIDS has shifted to **blue and ocean-based economies**, and social justice objectives have virtually disappeared. Governments and development partners are doing little to mitigate the corroding effects of the modern capitalist economy on small businesses and communities. These include the political pressure that powerful economic actors exert on development decision-making, the alienation of community resources by private developers, and the takeover of innovative local enterprise models by larger and often external economic actors. Small social and green enterprises cannot gain a foothold in this difficult terrain without special support and protection.

Leave no one behind. This "[central, transformative promise](#)" of the 2030 Agenda is not being honoured. Governments and development partners have made little effort to understand how intertwined climate, environmental and socio-economic crises disproportionately impact the most vulnerable and marginalised in society, or to take action to reduce those impacts. Resources meant to address the needs of these groups, such as climate finance, [fail to reach them](#), but often benefit others with the political capital and expertise to capture them.

Build a naturally resilient future. Nature-based solutions are integral to environmental sustainability and climate resilience. Yet few infrastructure or commercial development projects are designed to contribute to food and water security; climate adaptation and mitigation; biodiversity restoration and conservation; or nature-based livelihoods. Even when nature is considered, as in the creation of protected areas and restoration of critical ecosystems, the perspectives and knowledge of local people and other affected stakeholders are not always brought in. [Research](#) suggests that the barriers stem from both a lack of legislative and policy support for participatory nature-based approaches and from attitudes that see environmental protection and the involvement of local people as antithetical to development.

Recommendations to Caribbean governments

Caribbean civil society is eager to support governments along the road to sustainable development, and in that spirit, we offer these recommendations. Most are not new. In fact, many have already been endorsed, if not acted on, by Caribbean governments individually or collectively. But their uptake has been hampered by political imperatives, financial and other technical resource constraints, and institutional inertia. The SIDS4 conference and development of a new 10-year Plan of Action offer an opportunity for governments, their regional bodies and their development partners to reinforce and make good on their commitment to these foundational sustainable development actions.

1. Optimise the contribution of civil society through strong, mutually beneficial partnerships

Civil society contributes to sustainable development both by taking direct actions that improve the lives and opportunities of local people and by adding value to the efforts of government and other development actors. Its critical contributions include:

- advocating for and amplifying the voices of vulnerable or marginalised people, and delivering services to address their needs;
- helping in the preparation, review and approval of sustainable development policies, plans and projects;
- employing its research, expertise and scientific and local knowledge to advise on technical aspects of sustainable development;
- testing, promoting and implementing inclusive and locally based economic models and climate resilience strategies;
- managing and co-managing natural areas and environmental assets;
- building citizen capacity to contribute to sustainable development by improving understanding of issues and familiarity with the skills and tools needed to undertake projects on the ground and work with other stakeholders;
- monitoring and reporting on the alignment of government and private sector development initiatives with sustainable development goals and principles.

To enhance the impact of these contributions, we ask governments to:

- *Fully incorporate civil society into democratic governance and decision-making.* Revise legal and regulatory frameworks, institutional mechanisms and practices to better enable effective civil society participation. Establish regional and national standards defining the role of CSOs in development decision-making, to assure their meaningful participation at all relevant stages. Use those standards to review and revise laws and practices. Create formal space for civil society in legislative processes, as Belize has done in expanding its Senate to include a representative of the national CSO network.
- *Set up units to liaise and work with CSOs.* These units would streamline the provision of technical support and efficiently connect CSOs with relevant government and regional agencies.
- *Provide professional development opportunities for government personnel that work with civil society,* such as peer exchanges within the region, to give staff the skills to facilitate dialogue and provide information and support.
- *Establish formal partnerships between government and civil society.* These could cover diverse aspects of national sustainable development strategies, from managing natural areas to delivering climate adaptation to supporting local green enterprise development.

Principles to guide government-civil society engagement.

The guidelines for government support to civil society set out in the [Inter-American Principles on the Creation, Operation, Financing, and Dissolution of Nonprofit Civil Entities](#) form a useful checklist for governments: freedom of association; autonomy of will; legality; registration and recognition by an independent and autonomous agency; simple and transparent registration procedures; freedom of operation; freedom to seek, obtain and use funds; appropriate control of illicit financing; access to public financing under equal conditions and without discrimination; special tax regime; proportional penalties and due process; and voluntary and forced dissolution.

2. Promote and support locally owned environmental and social enterprises

- *Develop legal frameworks and regulations for enterprises that generate both economic and socio-environmental benefits.* Given their hybrid nature, these enterprises are not suited to either for-profit or non-profit legal frameworks. Although no Caribbean SIDS have yet enacted such legislation, Jamaica is working on a [new social enterprise law](#) which could serve as a pilot and eventual template for the region.
- *Establish finance facilities and technical support programmes tailored to the unique needs of green businesses.* [Studies](#) show that these businesses, particularly micro and community-based ones, struggle to secure start-up funding, access market information or tap expertise needed to develop and implement viable business plans. CSOs have stepped in to the extent possible, but most are not business support specialists. Scaling up the sector will require equally scaled up government engagement. Small business services must be reformed and staff capacity enhanced. CSOs can help in those efforts.
- *Prioritise local environmental and social enterprises for procurement and investment.* Government investments that support local enterprise generate immediate co-benefits for communities while helping those enterprises to succeed.

Caribbean government support for green enterprises

Several countries have made a start at supporting small green enterprises. In the early 2000s, the Saint Lucia Heritage Tourism Programme offered financial, technical and promotional support to micro enterprises and community initiatives that highlighted the country's natural and cultural assets. Even after it ended, the Programme's success inspired the evolution of a strong heritage and community tourism sector, which continues and is now supported by the recently established Community Tourism Agency. In Antigua and Barbuda, the Government is developing a blended microfinance facility to enhance climate resilience in small and micro enterprises in the agricultural sector.

3. Incorporate environmental, social, climate and gender justice at all levels of governance

- *Following the examples of Jamaica and Guyana, make a region-wide commitment to enshrine a right to a healthy environment in all national constitutions, and back it up with laws and policies that assure the right is considered in decision-making and that citizens have recourse in the courts to protect it.* Join as a Party to the Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean (the [Escazú Agreement](#)).
- *Implement open data policies, so that the environmental, climate and other data citizens need to contribute to sustainable development are publicly available in accessible forms.* Government agencies too often withhold information or make it difficult to access despite international commitments and national laws calling for transparency and freedom of information.
- *Build the understanding and capacity of justice officials regarding national and international environmental laws and issues related to intersectional social, environmental, climate and gender justice.*
- *Employ tools to assess the impact of government policies and actions on equity, inclusion, environmental health and climate resilience.*

Jamaica's Inclusive Growth Index Framework

The Planning Institute of Jamaica has created a tool to guide the country towards balanced growth that achieves social and environmental aims. The [Inclusive Growth Index Framework](#) aims to "help build a bridge of trust between the government and the economically, socially and politically excluded members of society who may not see their concerns clearly reflected in GDP". This uses seven sets of indices to track development progress: environmental quality, health, human capital, poverty reduction, wealth, and equity and equality.

4. Pursue only development and disaster mitigation options that are in harmony with nature and aligned to social development objectives

- *Review and revise the legislative and policy frameworks for development, environment and nature* to harmonise, eliminate gaps and inconsistencies, improve coordination among Ministries and clarify roles and responsibilities. Some countries have called for such a review; for example, Trinidad and Tobago included it as a priority action in its Vision 2030 National Development Policy.
- *Incorporate climate resilience and social inclusion criteria and indicators into development control legislation and procedures* and ensure that tools such as Environmental Impact Assessments are implemented consistently and rigorously.
- *Support local adaptation and development planning*, working with and through community organisations. The leadership of local communities and resource users that are on the frontline of the climate crisis and related disasters is essential to assure that actions are responsive to local needs, especially of the most vulnerable groups.

Community action on environmental protection and climate resilience

The region is full of cases of communities and CSOs directly addressing environmental challenges and protecting natural assets over long time periods. The [Ashton Lagoon](#) in Grenada, which had been severely degraded by a failed marina project, has been restored through a massive 13-year effort spearheaded by the CSO Sustainable Grenadines. In Saint Lucia, the [Sulphur Springs](#), a popular tourism site, has since 1995 been very effectively managed by a community CSO through a management agreement with government

Recommendations to the Caribbean's development partners

One legacy of the region's colonial history is that bilateral donors and international agencies have considerable influence over Caribbean governments, and over the use of funding provided to the region to achieve international objectives on development, environment and climate change. Development partners have encouraged Caribbean governments in some progressive directions but have often failed to fully respect national sovereignty, local priorities and the critical place of civil society in development. Their support has also frequently been poorly informed, self-interested and inflexible. Actions they should take to help achieve the shared objectives we have discussed here include these:

1. **Localise climate finance.** For climate finance to reach the places where it is most needed, Caribbean governments and civil society must manage and administer it, not international agencies. While the excuse generally made is that local entities lack the capacity to manage large sums and programmes, that capacity can only be built by doing it, and the sooner the better, as climate change is not waiting.
2. **Practice the principle of country ownership.** Put an end to the colonialist mindsets and inequitable relationships that have impeded capacity development of governments and civil society for too long. While financial resources and technology may be limited, these countries have a huge wealth of knowledge and expertise regarding lived experience and local conditions, much greater than that of external specialists and international development personnel.
3. **Prioritise people and the planet.** Stop using international aid as a vehicle for promoting foreign investment and business interests that too often undermine the environment, climate resilience and equitable people-centred development. Development assistance that is self-serving is not assistance at all.

This paper was developed by the Caribbean Natural Resources Institute ([CANARI](#)) based on dialogues and extensive work with civil society across the Caribbean. CANARI. 2024. *The Caribbean We Want: Civil society recommendations for transformative pathways to Caribbean sustainable development*. March 2024. Port of Spain: CANARI.

