

A close-up photograph of a pair of hands, likely belonging to a person of African descent, gently cupping a small, vibrant green seedling with several leaves. The seedling is growing out of a mound of dark, rich soil. The background is dark and out of focus, emphasizing the hands and the plant.

AN SDG AGENDA FOR THE CARIBBEAN

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INTRODUCTION



The year 2015 marks the expiration of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). In the end, Caribbean countries have largely failed to achieve the targets of the MDGs. This is not a surprising outcome considering that governments in the region, with a few exceptions and notwithstanding the submission of reams of required MDG documentation to the United Nations, made little effort to incorporate the objectives explicitly into actual policies and programmes. Whether our governments purposefully assigned a low priority to the effort or were constrained by limited capacity, ignoring the MDGs may very well have been a good decision. The Caribbean's status quo on many of the MDG targets were already relatively good by developing country standards. Therefore, limited public resources may have been, appropriately, better applied to more pressing problems.

In September 2015, the UN will inaugurate the agenda to replace the expired MDGs, dubbed the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It will be tempting for the governments of the Caribbean to treat the new agenda with the same scant regard as the previous one. Indeed, it is not hard to find reasons why such a choice would be made. For one thing, while the old MDGs were a focused agenda with 21 measurable and time-bound targets, the new SDGs are a dizzying sprawl of 169 targets covering every conceivable facet of human, social, and economic development, many of which are not measurable.

Notwithstanding the irrelevance of the earlier goals for the Caribbean and the lack of focus of the new effort, it would be a mistake for Caribbean leaders not to engage the new goals. And it would be a mistake that carries huge risks for the Caribbean.

This brief will argue why neglect of key aspects of the new agenda will matter gravely for the region and where and how its leaders can engage the new Sustainable Development Goals.

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MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS



The MDGs were a global initiative intended to improve the well-being of the world's poorest citizens. Accordingly, in 2000, the United Nations organized a worldwide commitment to end extreme poverty and improve the health and welfare of the poorest people within 15 years. These intentions were conveyed in eight time-bound goals, known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). These were to: (1) **eradicate extreme poverty**; (2) **achieve universal primary education**; (3) **promote gender equality and empower women**; (4) **reduce child mortality**; (5) **improve maternal health**; (6) **combat HIV/Aids, malaria and other diseases**, (7) **ensure environmental sustainability**; and (8) **engage in a global partnership for development**. The MDGs were considered the facilitator of developmental progress aimed at developing countries.

On the face of it, these are admirable goals and any country would welcome improvements in the areas that are the focus of these MDGs. However, the selection of these goals were guided by the particular challenges that were most glaring in

sub-Saharan African countries. Many of these challenges were not the most pressing ones facing other developing countries, particularly those in the Caribbean. For example, Goal 2, which addressed access to primary education, reflected a major challenge in countries with sparse educational infrastructure and populations spread out over vast land masses. This is not the situation in small-island, middle-income states. For sub-Saharan African countries, the average net enrollment in primary education when the goals were launched was 64% and the literacy rate was 70%. At those levels, there is great room for improvement with relatively modest reallocation of public resources. The Caribbean, meanwhile, averaged net primary enrolment of 96%, similar to that in Sweden, with an average literacy rate also of 96%. This was not uncommon for small island developing states (SIDS) for which net enrolment in primary education is 93% and the average literacy rate is 96%. At these levels, primary enrollment and adult literacy are not the most important challenges facing Caribbean economies.

Following a similar pattern, at the start of the MDGs, under-five mortality rates averaged 152 per thousand live births for African countries, whilst the corresponding rates for the Caribbean and all SIDS was 20 and 23 respectively.¹ A two-thirds reduction in these levels, as required by the MDGs, would take the under-five mortality rate in the Caribbean to seven per thousand, a level which would be better than that of the United States. The disparity and conclusion is similar for the target established for maternal mortality.

Yet another example of the inappropriateness of the MDGs for the Caribbean is the gender goal, reflected in the MDG target that the enrolment of girls in primary education be brought into equality with that of boys. This goal seeks to correct a traditional failure to promote the education of girls in many societies. At the onset of the MDGs, the enrollment of girls was only 83% that of boys in sub-Saharan Africa. In contrast, for the Caribbean (as well as other SIDS), the enrollment of girls was actually greater than that of boys, by some 10%.

The MDGs, therefore, addressed problems that remained as major challenges for many developing countries, particularly those in Africa, but for which the mostly middle-income countries in the Caribbean had already made great progress. While further progress in these areas might have still been welcome, the resources that would have been required would have been enormous. Improvements in public health and educational access can come relatively cheaply when a country is starting from a low level of infrastructural installation since there are easy wins to be had, for example by simply building schools and clinics. However, to cover the “last mile” in public health and educational outcomes requires proportionately greater resources. The cost of each additional infant life saved, for example, rises as infant mortality falls, a phenomenon referred to as “diminishing returns”. The same consideration applies to educational outcomes and poverty reduction.

Meanwhile, the countries in the Caribbean have other problems that require more urgent uses of public resources. While the low hanging fruit of infant and maternal mortality has been picked by Caribbean states, other public health issues remain. Beginning in the last two decades of the last century, leading up to the formulation of the MDGs, there had been a consistent rise in the incidence of non-communicable diseases, a development befitting the countries income status and relatively strong public health capacities. Heart diseases, cancers, cerebrovascular diseases, and diabetes constituted the leading causes of death.²

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National security is a major concern to Caribbean states. In some, ordinary crime and violence is costly in terms of lives lost and economic opportunities forgone. By reducing their homicide rates to that of Costa Rica, Guyana could raise its GDP per capita by 1.7 percent; the Dominican Republic by 1.8; Haiti and Jamaica by an incredible 5.4 percent.³

The islands vulnerability to natural disasters and their consequences is also another urgent call upon scarce resources. In an unpublished report, the Caribbean Development Bank has estimated that the economic cost of natural disasters in the region to in excess of US\$30b. The adverse consequences are not restricted to the immediate loss of life and destruction of property that occurs with hurricanes and earthquakes, but extend also to the discouragement of private investment, the diversion of fiscal resources, and the accumulation of public indebtedness.

In consideration of the inappropriateness of most of the MDG targets and the presence of more important uses for public resources, Caribbean governments may well have been right to pay only polite interest and documentary compliance in the pursuit of the MDGs. With that memory, the governments in the region may be tempted to treat the new SDGs with equally scant regard. This would be a grievous, and possibly a catastrophic, mistake.

1 The “under-five mortality rate” is the number of children that die before the age of five per 1,000 live births.

2 Caribbean Commission on Health and Development, Report of the Caribbean Commission on Health and Development, Pan American Health Organization, 2006.

3 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and the World Bank, Crime, Violence, and Development: Trends, Costs, and Policy Options in the Caribbean, World Bank, 2007.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS: DIFFERENT STORY



The Sustainable Development Goals represent a global agenda designed to ensure that the current generation can satisfy their wants in a way that does not compromise the quality of life of future generations. SDGs encompass two frontiers – development and climate activities.⁴ The SDG framework was developed based on consultation with over 70 countries, aligned to the commitment made by member states at the Rio+20 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development held in the Brazilian capital in 2012. The SDGs take the form of 17 goals, captured in 169 indicators, established to address poverty, inequality, governance, and, in particular, climate change.

Contrary to the situation with the MDGs, the SDGs are of consequence for the Caribbean. That small islands, by virtue of their size, are negligible contributors to climate change on a global scale may tempt Caribbean leaders to pay as little attention to the new Sustainable Development Goals as they did to the earlier goals. All the SIDS taken together, after all, contribute less than one percent to the planet's total carbon emissions, the key component of planetary warming. The issue takes on great importance for small islands, however, because they are on the frontline, facing disproportionately large consequences, of climate change and its impacts.

4 <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2014/nov/26/implementing-sustainable-development-goals>



The Caribbean, because of its geographic location, is prone to natural disasters. Hurricanes, volcanic eruptions, and earthquakes have wreaked a great deal of material and economic havoc in recent decades. Further, such events are of greater consequence for the Caribbean than the quantitative damage suggests. Because of the small size of these countries and the dependence of many on tourism, the disasters are proportionally more disruptive and destructive than they are in larger countries. In the face of a disaster, these tiny countries do not have the option of moving resources from unaffected areas to affected ones. Smallness determines that all areas of an island are often impacted by the disaster.

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In addition to the frequency of storms and other natural disasters, a potential existential challenge to the region is sea level rise. Many islands have vast areas of low-lying coastal planes that will be threatened by even modest sea level rise. Some 90 percent of Guyana’s population lives on the coastal plain that lies more than a metre and a half below sea level, protected by a series of dykes.

Climate change poses the potential for damage from more extreme weather events – both stronger storms and longer droughts – as well as from sea level rise. Since hurricanes arise from the evaporation of warm Atlantic water, warmer seas should produce greater evaporation and thus generate more violent storms. With estimates of a plausible warming of the planet being associated with one to five meters of sea level rise over the next hundred years, many Caribbean islands will experience calamitous loss of coastal land.

Sea-level rise will have impacts further inland, as well. Many Caribbean countries rely heavily on aquifers for their fresh water supply. The extreme case is Jamaica which derives some 84 percent of its fresh water supply from groundwater.⁵ Sea level rise will cause saline intrusion into some of the aquifers, rendering the water unusable.

Finally, many Caribbean islands depend heavily on resort tourism – an industry arguably unique in its ability to damage the islands’ marine environment. Through the construction of run-off channels, the destruction of coastal wetlands, marine debris and nutrient pollution, and the removal of seagrass, there is a large-scale assault on delicate marine ecosystems.

Issues of sustainability therefore cannot be ignored by Caribbean leaders. Given that failure to arrest the pace of climate change will have its greatest and most detrimental consequences here in the Caribbean (and amongst the small islands in the Pacific), Caribbean governments have a greater interest in supporting a global consensus towards sustainable economic and ecological management than any other country group in the world. And it will be more difficult to argue persuasively for such a global consensus if the nations of the Caribbean are themselves opting out meeting the goals.

5 Water Resources Authority, The Water Resources Development Master Plan 1990, Water Resources Authority, Kingston, Jamaica, 1990.

A satellite-style photograph of the Caribbean region, showing the outlines of North and South America, the Gulf of Mexico, and the Caribbean Sea. The landmasses are green, and the water is a deep blue. A white rectangular box is overlaid on the top center of the image, containing the title. Below the title box, a thin blue horizontal line spans the width of the page.

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While many of the goals emphasise sustainability, there are two that directly address the issue of sea level rise and the preservation of marine eco-systems, the issues of particular consequence for small islands – goals 13 and 14.

Goal 13 calls for action to combat climate change and its impacts. Having conceded earlier that our islands, by themselves, contribute only negligibly to the planet's CO2 output, the efforts of Caribbean leaders to reduce the islands' carbon emissions will not be useful because its direct effect on total emissions but only as part of the effort to build a global consensus. Such a global consensus can be accomplished only with accompanying domestic policies in the island nations that are harmonious with the efforts of other nations. Opting out by the islands, rather obviously, will undermine the achievement a consensus.

The main actions to meet Goal 13 address domestic policy. Action 13.1, to strengthen resilience and adaptive capacity to natural hazards, is of direct benefit to the islands. Given the direct consequence to each island of a failure to invest in resilience, the effort hardly needs additional encouragement. Indeed, given their experience with hurricanes, many islands have made some progress in resilience and adaptive capacity

despite constrained finances and limited public sector capacity.

Action 13.2 calls for the integration of climate change measures into national policies, strategies, and planning. However, considerations relevant to climate change hardly ever appear in debates surrounding national policies and economic planning that are not explicitly about environmental issues. Land use planning, meaningful environmental impact considerations, and mitigation of negative externalities do not weigh heavily in public policy-making in the Caribbean.

Similarly, while action 13.3 obligates improved education and awareness on issues related to climate change, the level of awareness of these issues and its potential impact on Caribbean islands is wanting, equally amongst the general population and the political decision-makers themselves. How to ensure increased awareness is a challenge, but the first obligation of a committed government would be a published programme of environmental management and mitigation that can be subjected to parliamentary and public scrutiny, providing some confidence that the depth and gravity of the issue is grasped by the governments.



A collective diplomatic priority of the Caribbean nations, bolstered by agreement at the CARICOM heads of government level, should be for developed countries to implement the commitment they have already given to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change to mobilise \$100 billion annually by 2020 to address the needs of developing countries in terms of appropriate and effective mitigation actions. This would require little public expenditure from Caribbean governments, only the recognition that the consequences of climate change is of great consequence for their countries, in order to mobilise substantial funding towards mitigation.

Goal 14 calls for the sustainable use of marine resources. Of particular importance to the Caribbean are the following actions. Action 14.4 calls for the regulation of harvesting and an end to overfishing and destructive fishing practices as well as action to restore fish stocks in the shortest feasible time. Overall reef fish density has been declining significantly across all sub-regions of the Caribbean basin, at rates of between 3 and 6 percent annually.⁶ The effort on this action will require a determination, based on a scientific assessment, of the maximum sustainable yields.

Fishing subsidies contribute to overfishing. Action 14.6 directly addresses this by obligating countries to prohibit certain forms of fisheries subsidies which contribute to overfishing and to refrain from introducing new such subsidies. Paradoxically and unhelpfully, the action allows for developing countries to exempt themselves through a clause for special and differential treatment. If Caribbean

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governments take advantage of this exemption, they will not be able to escape the consequences of depleted fish stocks.

Action 14.5 requires the conservation of at least 10 percent of coastal and marine areas. Given the dependence of island economies and livelihoods on services that derive from the marine environment and coastal ecosystems, 10 percent is a conservative goal. In the interest self-preservation, Caribbean governments should be much more ambitious than that.

There is existing international law that can be used to guide and govern behaviour in sustaining marine ecosystems. Caribbean governments must themselves, and diplomatically encouraging other states to, fully implement international laws with regard to the sustainable use of oceans, as reflected in many relevant United Nations Conventions, including those on the Law of the Sea and on Special Protected Areas and Wildlife.

6 Paddock MJ, Reynolds JD, Aguilar C, Appeldoorn RS, Beets J, Burkett EW, Chittaro PM, Clarke K, Esteves R, Fonseca AC, Forrester GE, Friedlander AM, García-Sais J, González-Sansón G, Jordan LK, McClellan DB, Miller MW, Molloy PP, Mumby PJ, Nagelkerken I, Nemeth M, Navas-Camacho R, Pitt J, Polunin NV, Reyes-Nivia MC, Robertson DR, Rodríguez-Ramírez A, Salas E, Smith SR, Spieler RE, Steele MA, Williams ID, Wormald CL, Watkinson AR, Côté IM, “Recent Region-wide Declines in Caribbean Reef Fish Abundance,” *Current Biology*, March 2009.

CONCLUSION



Many of the non-economic challenges in poor and middle-income countries can be related to the absence of widespread economic prosperity. And so it is with some of the environmental challenges in the Caribbean. With higher income levels, as it has done elsewhere, will surely come a greater appreciation for the quality of the environment. That may very well come to pass in time. But therein lies a paradox. The environmental dangers that the Caribbean faces are urgent. Failure to address them with the required urgency, on a global scale, pose dangers that will be realised long before economic growth can elevate the collective appreciation of conservation.

The small islands of the Caribbean along with Guyana with its sub-sea-level coast face an existential threat with continued poor management of its coastal and marine ecosystems and continued apathy to climate change. There is now at least a growing awareness of the seriousness of the problem and

the importance of corrective and mitigating actions. The Caribbean does not have the economic or political clout on its own to change the course of industrial evolution on global scale to reduce climate change or to improve the planet's marine environment. However, the United Nation's new Sustainable Development Goals now provides an opportunity to support such changes.

This brief has argued that Caribbean governments were right to treat the Millennium Development Goals with polite disregard given its narrow focus on extreme poverty, public health, and educational access – not the most important priorities of middle-income, small island states. With the Caribbean on the frontline of the consequences of climate change and poor marine environmental management, we are urging the governments in the region to engage the new agenda with some seriousness.

RECOMMENDATIONS



1. Review existing regulations with regard to land use, property development, and construction to assess their consistency with sustainable development and the preservation of terrestrial and marine eco-systems and promulgate appropriate new laws and regulations as is required to fill gaps.
2. Enforce existing regulations and development orders with regard to the minimisation and/or mitigation of environmental impacts.
3. Engage in a coordinated diplomatic push, through the United Nations, for countries to mobilise the promised funding under the auspices of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change to address the mitigation needs of developing countries.
4. Review the adequacy of and revise existing, and then enforce, fish harvesting regulations with the aim of putting an end to overfishing and destructive fishing practices, including placing restrictions on fishing and other detrimental activities with the goal of restoring fish stocks to sustainable levels.
5. Review existing fisheries programmes to identify explicit or implicit subsidies which contribute to overfishing and eliminate any such subsidies.
6. Conserve at least 10 percent of marine and coastal areas. This recommendation refers to effective conservation, not legal protection without adequate enforcement.
7. Fully implement the United Nations Conventions with regard to the sustainable use of the oceans.
8. Conduct an audit of remaining important and healthy natural resources, such as forests, rivers, aquifers, mangroves, seagrasses, and coral reefs. Then articulate a plan to preserve them.

APPENDIX



THE SEVENTEEN GOALS OF THE SDG'S ARE:

1. End poverty in all its forms everywhere.
2. End hunger, achieve food security, improve nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture.
3. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.
4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.
5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.
6. Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.
7. Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all.
8. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.
9. Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialisation and foster innovation.
10. Reduce inequality within and among countries.
11. Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.
12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns.
13. Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts.
14. Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development.
15. Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss.
16. Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.
17. Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalise the global partnership for sustainable development.



ABOUT CaPRI

The Caribbean Policy Research Institute (CaPRI) is a not-for-profit, public policy think tank based at the University of the West Indies, dedicated to the provision of impartial, evidence-based knowledge to inform economic and social policy decision-making in Jamaica and the wider Caribbean.

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