

**Caribbean SIDS Regional Preparatory Meeting
8-10 August 2023
Kingstown, Saint Vincent & the Grenadines**

Session 2: Social and Human Capital Development Priorities

24 July 2023, 3:30 PM – 5:30 PM

Background Note

Executive Summary

Ensuring social justice, social inclusion, sustainable livelihoods, and secure communities with access to essential goods and services are key components of sustainable development in SIDS. Youth engagement also plays a critical role in accelerating the implementation of sustainable development. Facilitating access to quality education and employment opportunities for the youth while promoting gender equality are central to fostering social inclusion. The COVID-19 pandemic amplified the challenges in the Caribbean region including inadequate social protection, poverty, and high levels of crime. In this session, participants will engage in a discussion about the pressing challenges in social development in the Caribbean region and explore effective strategies to address them. Issues such as health, food security, youth, education and citizen security will be explored, with the aim being to drive equitable and resilient social development.

Introduction: Challenges faced by Caribbean SIDS

The World Health Organization (WHO) highlights a concerning rise in noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) and mental health conditions. Recent data shows that more than half the populations in SIDS are dying prematurely from NCDs¹. The Caribbean region also has a particularly high prevalence of type 2 diabetes, which to some extent is driven by food

¹ World Health Organization, *Small Island Developing States accelerate action to tackle biggest killers*, 18 January 2023, <https://www.who.int/news/item/18-01-2023-small-island-developing-states-accelerate-action-to-tackle-biggest-killers>

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insecurity. These challenges paired with underfunded health services and hospital capacity has left populations vulnerable to COVID-19, with an estimated 36,800 people having lost their lives due to the virus. Moreover, although there have been vast improvements in access to drinking water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) in the Caribbean, there are still some documented incidences of diarrhea, malaria and trachoma among young children. The importance of access to abundant and clean water remains vital in the sub-region when natural disasters and health shocks strike.

Food security was already a challenge primarily faced by lower-income families and households, but the situation was further exacerbated by the pandemic. In June 2023, a report by the World Food Programme and the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) found that 3.7 million people, or 52 percent of the population of the English-speaking Caribbean face food insecurity.² The increase is largely attributed to factors such as financial losses caused by the pandemic, increased food price, and heightened exposure to climate hazards.

The Caribbean region grappled with a persistent issue of high unemployment rates, especially impacting women and youth, coupled with significant levels of poverty and inequality. Loss of income resulting from the pandemic has affected Caribbean populations across sectors, particularly those working in the tourism dependent economies. Further, those in the informal economy, who did not have access to unemployment and other social welfare support, were hit especially hard by these circumstances.

Caribbean countries had made remarkable progress towards attaining universal access to primary and secondary education services until the pandemic struck. The closure of educational facilities during lockdowns led to a significant setback, impacting nearly 12 million students across 29 Caribbean countries. The pandemic unveiled the defects and inequities in the education system across the Caribbean as many children were unable to continue learning as they did not have access to broadband and computers needed for online education. The inability of many children to attend and participate in classes had an impact on social development, and on the mental health and well-being of others.

² World Food Programme, *Food Security improves in the Caribbean yet challenges persist*, 27 June 2023, <https://www.wfp.org/news/food-security-improves-caribbean-yet-challenges-persist>

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Prior to the pandemic, the subregion was identified as having one of the highest rates of violence in the world, with gender-based violence being perceived as a threat to social security. Incidences of citizen security increased in many Caribbean SIDS during the pandemic. The Caribbean remains a transshipment point for the trafficking of drugs due to challenges in the implementation of border patrols. Young men are particularly likely to be involved in crime due to the high level of unemployment among the youth.

Recommendations for Action: What's Needed to accelerate action and progress

To catalyze action and drive meaningful progress, it is imperative to recognize and address the interconnected nature of challenges. Some suggested recommendations include:

- **Health:** Strengthen of institutional and legal frameworks, improve the healthcare infrastructure, moving towards universal health care, and strengthening national social protection systems.
- **Food Security:** Encourage agricultural policies that promote and support small scale farming and the production of nutritious and diverse foods. Provide capacity-building and finance to transform agricultural industries that are gender inclusive.
- **Unemployment:** Develop short-run policies to help youth immediately at risk and long-term ones for youth of the future. Develop policies to enhance an enabling environment for woman empowerment.
- **Education:** Explore non-traditional competency-based learning assessment systems to build knowledge-based societies and skilled workforces that allow countries to compete in a rapidly changing world. In addition, introduce students to STEM from an early age and expand TVET programmes to include new and emerging subjects. This requires capacity development opportunities for tutors at all levels in the educational system.
- **Citizen Security:** Develop a multi-pronged approach which includes social protection and youth development particularly for “youth at risk”. Countries should ensure that adequate resources are allocated to regional and national organizations responsible for combatting crime. Countries should also treat crime and violence as a public health issue.

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Proposed Guiding Questions for the Discussions

- What are the key challenges associated to the social and human capital development in the Caribbean and what type of responses should be considered?
- How can the international community best support Caribbean SIDS on recovery from the pandemic and transformation for social and human development?
- What types of innovative measures are required for addressing pressing social issues in Caribbean SIDS?
- How do we fully integrate youth, differently abled, and the ageing population into contributing positively to the socio-economic development of the subregion?
- How can the subregion engage the whole of society in tackling the identified challenges? How do we invigorate the community to work together to address these problems?