

**Global Americans Report**

**Securing an Equitable Future for  
Vulnerable Groups in the Caribbean**

**High-Level Working Group on U.S.  
CARICOM Relations**

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## Executive Summary

This report explores the social and economic wellbeing of “vulnerable groups” within Caribbean Small Island Developing States (SIDS) with a focus on the 15 member states of CARICOM (also known as the Caribbean Community). The World Bank defines vulnerable groups “as people or populations that have specific characteristics that make them more likely to need humanitarian assistance or be excluded from financial and social services”. Among those considered vulnerable are women, children and youth, migrants, Indigenous and Tribal Peoples (ITPs), and the LGBTQ+ community.

The report highlights the following:

- Climate change has injected a new element into how vulnerable communities in the Caribbean function as they are often the most affected by natural disasters, extreme weather, environmental degradation and transnational disease. They are also often the last to receive assistance.
- Related to climate change is the rising challenge that livelihoods essential to the subsistence of local communities are increasingly at risk. If sectors, such as fishing fade away, so too might the communities dependent on their activity.
- Migration has emerged as a major issue facing the Caribbean. Driven by the negative impact of climate change, political upheaval and lack of economic opportunities, intraregional migration has also increased, which has widened the ranks of vulnerable communities. In the 2020s, the Caribbean has become both a crossroads for migration heading north to the United States and Canada or Europe as well as becoming a zone of destination on an intraregional basis.
- Generational poverty is a major issue in some countries, which encompasses many factors, such as intergenerational transmission, low human capital and stigma and discrimination.
- Some communities are still struggling to gain their full rights, which are reflected by longstanding laws from the colonial era, such as those pertaining to the LGBTQ+ community in certain countries or with Indigenous or Tribal Rights concerning land rights. The LGBTQ+ issue, in particular, is a sensitive issue between how the U.S. regards the issue and how many in the Caribbean see the pushing of this agenda as a form of cultural imperialism.
- Efforts to create a more inclusive environment for vulnerable groups face financial constraints, domestic public indifference or, in some cases, hostility, including violence.
- Adequate housing is a major concern for many in vulnerable communities. Considering that most Caribbean countries are largely urban, a lack of adequate living spaces is highly problematic and contributes to long-term poverty cycles, violence, discrimination and migration.
- One of the more pressing areas where U.S. and Caribbean countries can find common ground is targeted funding for policies that support the principles of leaving no one behind, non-discrimination and commitment to universal access to the range of social services that states provide.
- Recommendations are provided at the end of the study, but the common theme is the need to strengthen social protection systems in the Caribbean to protect the most vulnerable.

## 1. Introduction

In the Caribbean, as with any region comprising multiple and diverse countries, the composition of vulnerable groups varies. For the purposes of this report, women, children and youth, migrants, Indigenous and Tribal Peoples (ITPs), and the LGBTQ+ community represent vulnerable groups which disproportionately face higher hurdles toward being equal stakeholders within society. Individuals in these groups may suffer from exclusion, weaker government protection, and more challenging socio-economic conditions. Equally important to this discussion is what is referred to as livelihood vulnerability, broadly defined as the degree to which livelihoods are susceptible and unable to cope with adverse pressures, such as climate change, market instability and technological changes.<sup>1</sup>

The policy landscape is broadly defined by the Caribbean's own vulnerability. Caribbean Small Islands Developing States (SIDS) face a range of issues that have impacted their development: geographical remoteness, small populations, heavy dependence on tourism or extractive industries, complex colonial legacies, and vulnerability to external shocks. Though much progress has been made (with most Caribbean countries being considered Middle Income by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund), problems persist while new risks emerge. Pressing social challenges include rising crime and citizen insecurity, youth unemployment, lack of recognition of ITPs' rights, climate change-induced migration, tough laws against LGBTQ+ people, and structural gender-based violence.

This report takes a challenge-centric approach by delineating shared challenges to social and material wellbeing and offering suggestions to bridge the gap between Caribbean vulnerable groups and society writ large. The report is divided into four sections. The first is Climate Change and Socio-Economic Outcomes, which addresses the extent to which each group can earn a living and live a healthy life and to what degree each vulnerable group is impacted by effects of climate change. This extends to migrant communities, both from within the Caribbean and those transiting it to other points on the map. The second section, Political Representation and Recognition in the Public Sphere, focuses on the extent to which each group has their rights as individuals safeguarded in official channels and their representation in state decision making processes. The third section deals with an issue of increasing importance to the Caribbean, from both a socio-economic and political standpoint, intra-regional migration and outward migration, which is straining scarce resources and demanding new responses. The last section covers the dynamic of physical violence, a factor that has become more pronounced in recent years and has a great impact on vulnerable communities.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://ecologyandsociety.org/vol29/iss1/art13/>

### Basic Data for CARICOM Counties

Country	Population Size	GDP Per Capita (US\$)	Land Area (sq km)	GDP Size (US\$ bn, 2024)
Antigua & Barbuda	94,300	21,560	443	2.1
Bahamas	412,620	34,750	10,010	14.4
Barbados	282,000	22,673	431	NA
Belize	410,820	7,829	22,966	3.3
Dominica	73,040	8,954	754	0.7
Grenada	126,180	10,464	344	1.4
Guyana	813,830	20,626	214,969	21.2
Haiti	11,724,000	1,693	27,560	19.8
Jamaica	2,825,400	6,874	10,830	20.1
Montserrat	4,377	NA	102	NA
St. Kitts & Nevis	47,760	22,553	NA	1.1
St. Lucia	180,250	13,980	616	4.3
St. Vincent & The Grenadines	103,700	10,279	389	28.4
Suriname	623,240	6,069	163,800	4.3
Trinidad & Tobago	1,534,940	18,333	5,128	28.4

Sources: World Bank <https://genderdata.worldbank.org/en/indicator/ny-gdp-pcap-cd> and Statista <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1066610/gross-national-income-per-capita-latin-america-caribbean/> GDP size. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/802640/gross-domestic-product-gdp-latin-america-caribbean-country/>.

## 2. Climate Change and Socio-Economic Outcomes

In line with the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Caribbean countries are keenly aware of the socio-economic challenges facing them. In this, climate change represents a major obstacle. The Caribbean has been described as “ground zero” for the climate emergency.<sup>2</sup> Despite having a small carbon footprint compared to large industrialized nations, Caribbean countries are being disproportionately impacted by climate change.<sup>3</sup> According to the IDB by 2050 annual losses related to extreme weather events will cost the region \$22 billion—a figure representing 10 percent of the current regional economy.<sup>4</sup> An example of the high costs associated with hurricane damage is Dominica, which in 2017 suffered losses and damages associated with Category 5 Hurricane Maria equal to 226 percent of the country’s 2016 GDP.<sup>5</sup> Similar extreme weather damage has been done to Grenada, the Bahamas, Puerto Rico and St. Maarten.

These challenges pose a significant threat to everyone, especially for vulnerable groups. Following the Fourth International Conference on Small Island Developing States hosted in St. John's, Antigua and Barbuda in May 2024, world leaders adopted the “Antigua and Barbuda Agenda for SIDS: A Renewed Declaration for Resilient Prosperity” to assist SIDS countries achieve development objectives within the next 10 years. Among these goals is building

<sup>2</sup> <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/07/1121902>

<sup>3</sup> [https://unfccc.int/resource/docs/publications/cc\\_sids.pdf](https://unfccc.int/resource/docs/publications/cc_sids.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> <https://climatepromise.undp.org/news-and-stories/how-countries-latin-america-and-caribbean-are-financing-their-climate-goals>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.imf.org/-/media/Files/Publications/CR/2021/English/1DMAEA2021001.ashx>

economic resilience, scaling up climate finance, and increasing investment for people in vulnerable situations including children, youth, women, ITPs, local communities, people with disabilities, migrants, displaced persons, among others.<sup>6</sup>

Though the region has made significant progress reducing poverty, on average 30 percent of the Caribbean population is below the poverty line. Given the lack of updated data, understanding the social dynamics of poverty in the Caribbean remains a challenge. According to the World Bank, except for Jamaica and Dominican Republic which systematically monitors poverty, most countries in the Caribbean are data deprived, only monitoring every 10 years, while the recommendation is to monitor every 3 to 5 years.<sup>7</sup>

### Poverty Rates: Caribbean

Country	Poverty Rate % of Total Population
Antigua and Barbuda (2023)	18.0%
Bahamas, The (2021)	12.5%
Barbados (2017)	25.7%
Belize (2022)	35.7%
Dominica (2016)	29.0%
Dominican Republic (2022)	27.70
Grenada(2018)	25.0%
Guyana (2023)	48.4%
Haiti (2012)	59.0%
Jamaica (2021)	16.7%
St. Kitts and Nevis (2007/2008)	21.8%
St. Lucia (2015)	25.0%
St. Vincent and the Grenadines (2007/2008)	30.2%
Suriname (2022)	17.5%
Trinidad and Tobago (2014)	24.5%
Turks and Caicos (2023)	22.0%

Source: World Bank. <https://pip.worldbank.org/country-profiles/GRD>. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/latinamerica/data-absence-hampers-poverty-reduction-efforts- caribbean>. Dominica data from UNICEF. Turks and Caicos. <https://borgenproject.org/turks-and-caicos-economy/#:~:text=About%2022%25%20of%20the%20population,suffering%20so%20much%20from%20inequality>. Data on Antigua and Barbuda came from Borgen Project. <https://borgenproject.org/child-poverty-in-antigua-and-barbuda/#:~:text=Antigua%20and%20Barbuda%20is%20a.23%25%20of%20the%20Eastern%20Caribbean>.

The root causes for poverty in the Caribbean include intergenerational transmission, low levels

<sup>6</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/fourth-international-conference-small-island-developing-states-antigua-and-barbuda-agenda-sids-abas-renewed-declaration-resilient-prosperity-agreed-ad-ref>

<sup>7</sup> <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/latinamerica/data-absence-hampers-poverty-reduction-efforts- caribbean>



of education and work skills which point people to low-skilled and low-paying jobs. The picture becomes even more complicated considering that there is what is called a “gender poverty penalty”, in which women confront a higher rate of poverty than men during their most productive years.<sup>8</sup> This higher poverty rate makes it more difficult to break the chain of intergenerational poverty.

Two other factors loom large. In many cases, Caribbean countries have had major economic problems that have required structural adjustment programs, often accompanied by cuts subsidies and other social programs as well as trimming the ranks of civil servants. The other factor is the lack of an endgame for social welfare programs. Such programs address poverty, but do not provide a program to lift people out of poverty?<sup>9</sup>

Last but hardly least in poverty in the Caribbean is poor governance, which a knock-on effect in that corruption, political violence and poor educational options have led to ongoing poverty, especially in rural areas. The worst case of this is evident in Haiti, which has seen a kaleidoscope of natural disasters, deforestation, bad government, political violence, a breakdown in law and order, and inadequate infrastructure from everything from power generation to public transport.

Reflecting many of the above factors is youth unemployment (defined as individuals aged from 15 to 24 years old), which remains one of the region’s long-standing problems. According to recent studies, on average the Eastern Caribbean region youth unemployment is at 26 percent—almost three times higher than the rate for adults and far above the Latin America and the Caribbean regional average youth unemployment rate of 16 percent.<sup>10</sup> These figures are particularly daunting considering that 60 percent of the Caribbean population is under 30 years of age.

Lack of sustained economic growth is a major factor. Since the year 2000, the region’s economic growth has slowed, generating fewer jobs and high levels of unemployment.<sup>11</sup> Small size economies, high public debt, dependence on natural resources or tourism, as well as high susceptibility to commodity prices and shocks from large neighboring countries are key causes. Consequently, more young people decide to migrate or are prone to fall under the hands of organized crime fueling the region’s violence epidemic.<sup>12</sup>

The Caribbean Development Bank has also assessed that, among young people, unemployment is higher among young women than among young men: 30 percent of young women employed compared to 20 percent of young men unemployed.<sup>13</sup> In many Caribbean countries girls

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<sup>8</sup> <https://gsdrc.org/document-library/the-challenges-of-poverty-and-social-welfare-in-the-caribbean/#:~:text=The%20human%20capital%20of%20the,alleviate%20rather%20than%20reduce%20poverty>

<sup>9</sup> <https://gsdrc.org/document-library/the-challenges-of-poverty-and-social-welfare-in-the-caribbean/#:~:text=The%20human%20capital%20of%20the,alleviate%20rather%20than%20reduce%20poverty>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.unicef.org/easterncaribbean/media/2976/file/Youth%20unemployment%20in%20OECS.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2017/11/13/na111417-crime-and-youth-unemployment-in-the-caribbean>

<sup>12</sup> <https://publications.iadb.org/en/publications/english/viewer/Understanding-Economic-Growth-in-the-Caribbean-Region-A-Conceptual-and-Methodological-Study.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> <https://oecs.int/en/component/content/article/the-dark-cloud-of-youth-unemployment?catid=2&Itemid=286>; <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/latinamerica/opportunities-latin-america-caribbean-youth-unemployment#:~:text=With%20an%20average%20youth%20unemployment,young%20individuals%20of%20themselves%20ensnared>.

complete secondary school and graduate at higher rates than boys and the region leads in terms of the share of women managers (Jamaica reporting the highest proportion of women managers in the world at 59 percent), but women continue to face significant economic challenges.<sup>14</sup> Men are still more likely to be employed and earn more than their female counterparts; according to the World Bank, in countries such as Dominica and Jamaica, women earn approximately 85 cents for every dollar earned by men.<sup>15</sup> This leads to the question - do women peak at a managerial role while men go on to get promoted and dominate senior roles? Appearances say yes, but more data is needed to quantify this.

Another dimension of the challenges facing Caribbean societies and vulnerable communities is the need to assure access to quality education and the related need of preparing a competitive work force as an over-the-horizon contribution to overcoming structural inequalities, improving social mobility and driving productivity gains.<sup>16</sup> There are many positive aspects to the Caribbean educational systems, including some of the world's highest literacy rates (as with Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, and Trinidad and Tobago) and a well-respected higher education system via the University of the West Indies and St. George's University (Grenada). This is important considering that there are an estimated 11 million young people between the ages of 15 to 19 years of age, some of them from vulnerable communities to impact a broader audience and provide a more competitive educational foundation vis-à-vis economic opportunities.

Minority groups such as the LGBTQ+ community and the region's ITPs are also extremely susceptible to poverty and worse socio-economic outcomes than the rest of society. According to a United Caribbean Trans Network (UCTRANS) survey, employment discrimination and discrimination in health services remain key challenges—according to data from the survey 78 percent of the respondents affirmed having experienced depression or anxiety in their lifetime. In addition, data shows that HIV disproportionately impacts transgender people in the Caribbean—1 in 2 transgender persons in Jamaica lives with HIV.<sup>17</sup>

More important in terms of overall size of the Caribbean's population are the ITPs, who largely reside in Guyana, French Guiana, Suriname, Dominica and Belize. Although their treatment varies from country to country, they face challenges with political representation, which has exposed them to greater discrimination, economic marginalization, and the adverse effects of climate change. According to recent data from the World Bank, in Latin America and the Caribbean, indigenous people represent 17 percent of the population living in extreme poverty—a striking figure, considering they only represent 8 percent of the regional population.<sup>18</sup>

Key to this situation is the challenge of making Free, Prior, Informed Consent (FPIC) agreements between the government and ITPs work to the satisfaction of all parties. With Guyana's Low Carbon Development Strategy (LCDC), which is oriented to support the

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/opinion/2022/03/08/empowering-women-and-girls-in-the-caribbean-for-long-lasting-change>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/opinion/2022/03/08/empowering-women-and-girls-in-the-caribbean-for-long-lasting-change>

<sup>16</sup> <https://publications.iadb.org/en/state-education-latin-america-and-caribbean-learning-assessments>

<sup>17</sup> [https://www.unaids.org/en/resources/presscentre/featurestories/2021/april/20210401\\_caribbean-transgender-community#:~:text=Except%20for%20Cuba%2C%20no%20Caribbean,Marco%2C%20UCTRANS'%20Executive%20Director](https://www.unaids.org/en/resources/presscentre/featurestories/2021/april/20210401_caribbean-transgender-community#:~:text=Except%20for%20Cuba%2C%20no%20Caribbean,Marco%2C%20UCTRANS'%20Executive%20Director)

<sup>18</sup> <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/145891467991974540/indigenous-latin-america-in-the-twenty-first-century-the-first-decade>

conservation of rainforests to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, there have been past concerns over the genuine participation of Amerindian communities.<sup>19</sup> However, Guyana’s government is making greater efforts to be more inclusive with the Amerindian population, with around 500 projects having been started in more than 220 Indigenous communities.<sup>20</sup>

In Suriname, the Indigenous population makes up 3.8 percent of the population while Tribal peoples constitute an additional 21.7 percent.<sup>21</sup> Much of this population lives in the country’s vast forested interior, a place where nearly 90 percent of Suriname’s natural resources are located. Two large multinational companies, China’s Zijin Mining and the US Newmont Corporation, account for a small portion of the workforce, with small-scale artisanal mining employing many. The data, however, is somewhat sketchy. As noted by an Organization of American States report in 2023: “An estimated 20,000 to 35,000 people work in Suriname’s mining industry, though the true figure (including informal miners) may be twice that number.”<sup>22</sup>

While mining plays a major role in Suriname’s economy, it is a major problem, causing pollution of ITP lands, including mercury poisoning). This situation has impacted ITP health, leading to prostitution and violence. Moreover, Indigenous people have also not received any compensation for the exploitation of their lands. This has further marginalized and rendered Suriname’s ITPs as one of the most vulnerable communities of the country.<sup>23</sup> The Surinamese government has been slow in providing its ITPs rights or protection. Although there are no official studies on the impact of climate change on these communities, in an August 2022 letter to UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, the Association of Village Chiefs of Suriname and KAMPOS—the country’s main ITP organizations—warned that years of extreme weather events related to climate change made their crops and harvest fail and increased their food insecurity.<sup>24</sup>

Climate change is also complicating another socioeconomic challenge, the lack of adequate housing. The Caribbean suffers from an acute shortage of affordable housing, which is especially onerous for low-income groups and vulnerable groups. According to the IDB, an estimated 45 percent of households in Latin America and the Caribbean lack decent housing. The exclusion from the formal housing market has led to poor urban households opting for the illegal occupation of mainly state land.<sup>25</sup>

The primary causes of the Caribbean’s housing crisis are ongoing urbanization, onerous rules and regulations, delays in housing permits, crowding out of land for the tourist industry, and refusal by the private sector to build affordable housing. This translates into poor sanitation, lack of potable water, and crowded conditions. In turn, these problems contribute to high levels of crime, domestic violence, the easier spread of disease, and over time an erosion of the legitimacy of state authority. And the problem is most likely to get worse. The Caribbean is already overwhelmingly urban: in 2017, 72 percent of population lived in urban areas; this is projected to rise to 80 percent by 2025.

### **3. Political Representation and Recognition in the Public Sphere**

Promoting political inclusion of all is vital to achieve sustainable development and safeguard

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.mdpi.com/1999-4907/8/3/51>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.mdpi.com/1999-4907/8/3/51>

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.oas.org/ext/en/security/fight-illegal-mining-financing>

<sup>23</sup> <https://globalamericans.org/maroons-and-indigenous-people-in-suriname-the-struggle-for-land-rights/>

<sup>24</sup> <https://vids.sr/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Letter-VIDS-KAMPOS-to-UN-Secr-Gen-02Jul2022.pdf>

<sup>25</sup> <https://sdg.iisd.org/commentary/guest-articles/building-urban-resilience-in-the-caribbean-policies-practices-and-prospects/#:~:text=Unlike%20some%20parts%20of%20the,countries%20of%20the%20Global%20North>

human rights. The lack of equitable representation and recognition of social groups in the public spaces is a major hurdle in achieving these objectives.<sup>26</sup> In the Caribbean, women, children, ITPs, and migrants are regarded as the most vulnerable.<sup>27</sup> Although the LGBTQ+ community also faces its own set of hurdles, Caribbean policymakers tend to regard this as an issue that impacts a very small segment of the population with agitators on this position coming from outside the region, many of which are coming back to the islands with these positions.

Political representation broadly implies a group's ability to represent its interests. All groups should enjoy equal rights to participate, serve in positions of political power, and influence policymaking, ensuring that majorities do not disregard minorities. Equally important, recognition stands as the positive acknowledgement of a person's or group's existence, identity, rights, and achievements within a society. Recognition based on self-identification is vital to secure human rights, safeguarding the equal rights of minorities within society.<sup>28</sup>

Although more needs to be done, women have made progress towards equal participation in the policy-making process. According to the United Nations Women, in the Anglophone Caribbean on average, women held 22 percent of ministerial cabinet positions.<sup>29</sup> Aruba, Barbados, Dominica and Trinidad and Tobago have had women prime ministers. Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago, and Jamaica have put in place legislation to ensure that at least 30 percent of elected positions are occupied by women—30 percent being the minimum standard established by the Beijing Platform for Action to ensure women's representation.<sup>30</sup>

Reasons for the weak showing in women's representation are rooted in socio-cultural idiosyncratic factors as well as institutional and economic constraints. In the Anglo-Caribbean women's suffrage became universal only in the mid-20th century—with Jamaica in 1944 becoming the first country to recognize it.<sup>31</sup> Although women are occupying more positions of power across the Caribbean, from former Dominica Prime Minister Dame Eugenia Charles, the first woman elected as head of government in the Caribbean in 1980, to now serving Barbados Prime Minister Mia Amor Mottley and CARICOM General Secretary Carla Barnett, regional action is needed ensure higher representation.

Making the political environment more appealing to women remains a key challenge in the Caribbean. But this is complicated. According to the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) younger generations of Caribbean women tend to outperform men in academics, but they are not entering politics: 17.3 percent of men between the ages of 25 and 34 have higher education in the Caribbean, among women it increases to 25.7 percent.<sup>32</sup>

The position of Caribbean ITPs - primarily located in Belize, Suriname, Guyana, French Guiana and Dominica—varies from country to country. Although the international community has recognized, through multiple agreements, ITP rights to self-determination and participation in the decision-making process regarding the activities that may impact their own societies and territories, few states have ratified them.<sup>33</sup> This lack of recognition has further exposed them to

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<sup>26</sup> <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/political-representation/>

<sup>27</sup> <https://unsdg.un.org/latest/blog/protecting-caribbeans-most-vulnerable-people-face-covid-19>

<sup>28</sup> <https://minorityrights.org/equality-in-dignity-requires-recognition-of-minorities-states-mrg-briefing/>

<sup>29</sup> <https://parlAmericas.org/uploads/documents/WomensPoliticalLeadershipUNWomen.pdf>

<sup>30</sup> <https://parlAmericas.org/uploads/documents/WomensPoliticalLeadershipUNWomen.pdf>

<sup>31</sup> <http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/suffrage.htm>

<sup>32</sup> [https://blogs.iadb.org/caribbean-dev-trends/en/gender-gaps-in-education-in-the-caribbean-are-girls-doing-better-than-](https://blogs.iadb.org/caribbean-dev-trends/en/gender-gaps-in-education-in-the-caribbean-are-girls-doing-better-than-boys/#:~:text=The%20share%20of%20women%20that,also%20more%20educated%20than%20men)

[boys/#:~:text=The%20share%20of%20women%20that,also%20more%20educated%20than%20men](https://blogs.iadb.org/caribbean-dev-trends/en/gender-gaps-in-education-in-the-caribbean-are-girls-doing-better-than-boys/#:~:text=The%20share%20of%20women%20that,also%20more%20educated%20than%20men)

<sup>33</sup> 1957 ILO Indigenous and Tribal Populations Convention, 1957 (No. 107); 1989 International Labour Organization Convention (No. 169); 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights Indigenous Peoples. 34 The US and Canada have not ratified No. 169, but the following have in the Western hemisphere –

discrimination, economic marginalization, and political exclusion, as well as to the adverse effects of climate change. More on the economic issue in the next section.

One point of friction is that most Caribbean countries have not ratified the 1989 International Labour Organization's (ILO) Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention No. 169.<sup>34</sup> That document advocates that governments recognize the aspirations of these peoples to exercise control over their own institutions, ways of life and economic development and to maintain and to develop their own identities, languages and religions within the framework of the states in which they live.<sup>35</sup> Dominica is the sole exception, not to mention it has actively recognized and protected the Kalinago people's rights since the country's independence. In other cases, governments have chosen to recognize Indigenous and Tribal peoples' rights in their constitutions and laws to varying degrees.

Suriname stands out for not ratifying the ILO Convention No. 169 and not recognizing rights for its Indigenous and Tribal peoples, especially regarding land rights, a source of contention.<sup>36</sup> The law regarding collective rights of ITPs has yet to pass parliament.

The Caribbean LGBTQ+ communities also face barriers to equal rights and recognition. In violation of international standards such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the Pact of San Jose, several Caribbean countries continue to criminalize same-sex consensual relations. Moreover, no Caribbean country, except for Cuba, allows transgender people to modify their gender on official identification.<sup>37</sup>

Although most anti-LGBTQ+ laws date back to colonial times, Caribbean countries claim that they are not enforced. Generally speaking, the Caribbean public regards this as a minor issue, pushed by a handful of people. Several church groups remain adamantly opposed to same-sex marriages and often exercise strong influence on debate of any major piece of legislation concerning gender, reproductive rights, and sexuality.<sup>38</sup>

The Jamaican government's refusal to recognize same-sex marriages sparked a diplomatic row with the United States: in 2023, the government of Prime Minister Andrew Holness refused to grant diplomatic immunity to the spouse of a gay diplomat to be appointed to the U.S. Embassy in Kingston. This prompted the U.S. government to retaliate by not renewing visas to high-ranking Jamaican diplomats.<sup>39</sup> For many in the Caribbean this smacked of U.S. cultural imperialism with the larger country seeking to impose its values on a smaller one.

Nevertheless, in recent years many Caribbean countries, including Antigua and Barbuda, St Kitts and Nevis, Barbados, Dominica, Belize, and Trinidad and Tobago have abolished similar laws, taking important steps to advance human rights recognition and protection for all their

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Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru and Venezuela.

<sup>34</sup> The US and Canada have not ratified No. 169, but the following have in the Western hemisphere – Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru and Venezuela.

<sup>35</sup> [https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100\\_ILO\\_CODE:C169](https://normlex.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C169)

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.iwgia.org/en/suriname/4250-iw-2021-suriname.html>

<sup>37</sup> [https://www.unaids.org/en/resources/presscentre/featurestories/2021/april/20210401\\_caribbean-transgender-community#:~:text=Except%20for%20Cuba%2C%20no%20Caribbean.Marco%2C%20UCTRANS'%20Executive%20Director.](https://www.unaids.org/en/resources/presscentre/featurestories/2021/april/20210401_caribbean-transgender-community#:~:text=Except%20for%20Cuba%2C%20no%20Caribbean.Marco%2C%20UCTRANS'%20Executive%20Director.)

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14662043.2020.1782624>

<sup>39</sup> <https://jamaica-gleaner.com/article/news/20230720/oliver-mair-among-four-whose-diplomatic-visas-have-not-been-extended-us>

citizens regardless of sexual orientation.<sup>40</sup> Same sex marriages are not recognized in Suriname, but the topic came up when the new Civil Code was updated. In many cases, local and regional civil society groups including the Eastern Caribbean Alliance for Diversity and Equality have effectively challenged the constitutionality of these laws in the country's highest courts.<sup>41</sup>

#### 4. Intraregional and Out-Migration

The Caribbean has a long history of intraregional migration and outbound migration. In the early decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the dynamic of intraregional migration and outbound migration is a major factor in the region's socio-economic landscape as large waves of people are using the Caribbean as a transit point to North America and Europe as well as moving from one part of the Caribbean to another. According to the IDB, in 2020 there were an estimated 859,400 intraregional and 745,700 extra-regional immigrants living in the Caribbean.<sup>42</sup> What is noteworthy is that the intraregional share of migrants rose from 46 percent in 2000 to 56 percent in 2020. The countries that showed up most in this as recipients of migrants were the Dominican Republic, Barbados and the Bahamas. Haitians were overwhelmingly the biggest group of migrants across the region. The largest group of external immigrants are Venezuelans, who have headed to Aruba, Curaçao, the Dominican Republic, Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago. Other extra-regional immigrants include Chinese, North Americans and Europeans.

The reasons for the movement of people through and throughout the Caribbean include the opportunities for Caribbean people to find better job opportunities in North America and Europe, within the Caribbean the attraction of working for more well-developed tourist economies (like the Bahamas, the British and U.S. Virgin Islands and St. Kitts-Nevis); and growing problems with climate change.

The last also points back to the problem of vulnerable livelihoods, which impacts agriculture and fishing. In the poorer Caribbean countries, the adverse impact of climate change is coming in the form of more extreme hurricanes, droughts and floods, all of which hurt agricultural production. Considering that many countries import food, any disruptions in locally grown food show up quickly in import bills. Moreover, external shocks like Covid-19, global supply chain disruptions and transport costs only reinforced the impact of livelihood vulnerability. Similar problems face the fishing industry. The combination of overfishing by foreign fleets of ships, many of them from China, dying coral reefs, and heavy tourism, mainly tour ships, has hurt local Caribbean fishing.<sup>43</sup>

According to the Caribbean Food Security and Livelihoods Survey, conducted by CARICOM, with collaboration with the United Nations World Food Programme, it is estimated that 3.7 million people are moderately or severely food insecure in the English-speaking Caribbean, equal to half the island group's population.<sup>44</sup> As people continue to confront challenges to earn a living and meet essential needs, the impact is the greatest on low-income families, youth and other vulnerable communities.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> <https://apnews.com/article/lgbtq-caribbean-religion-antigay-law-christians-21b3bcf6fe6e8976109f0c8e70050fd2>

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/04/24/dominica-high-court-decriminalizes-same-sex-conduct#:~:text=In%20a%20historic%20judgment%20published,Kitts%20and%20Nevis%2C%20and%20Barbados.>

<sup>42</sup> <https://blogs.iadb.org/migracion/en/challenges-and-opportunities-of-migration-in-the-caribbean/#:~:text=Recent%20changes%20in%20the%20migratory,these%20countries%2C%20followed%20by%20Guyanese>

<sup>43</sup> <https://dialogo-americas.com/articles/chinese-fishing-fleet-threatens-marine-biodiversity-in-latin-america-and-the-caribbean/>

<sup>44</sup> <https://www.wfp.org/publications/caribbean-food-security-livelihoods-survey-april-2024>

<sup>45</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/caribbean-food-security-livelihoods-survey-natural-hazards-and->

The challenges posed by migration and the vulnerable livelihoods are likely to get worse. Venezuela has already produced close to 8 million migrants due to political upheaval, socio-economic instability, and an ongoing humanitarian crisis. The Maduro government's stealing of the July 2024 presidential election has only heightened the sense of uncertainty and could trigger further waves of migrants, many of whom are likely to transit through the Caribbean. At the same time, Haiti's crisis is likely to continue, which could force even more Haitians to flee. Sadly, Haitians and Venezuelans make up some of the Caribbean's most vulnerable communities.

While migration has been a major challenge to Caribbean governments, putting strains on social networks and contributing to violence, there has been a valuable learning process for local governments. In Trinidad and Tobago this has led to efforts to gain better control of entry requirements and information sharing on newly arrived people, to upgrade the country's asylum system, and improve access to education. As Raghunath Mahabir, a Lecturer and Coordinator of the National Security and Intelligence Program at the University of the Southern Caribbean, observed: "The Trinidad and Tobago government, while ensuring that they develop a vibrant migrant policy to deal with the migration influx in a humane way, must also develop policies and infrastructure to assist migrants in this special time of need."<sup>46</sup> One action was to allow Venezuelan children to be admitted into schools in Trinidad and Tobago beginning in September 2024.<sup>47</sup>

## 5. Violence

The Caribbean region is currently facing a severe security and health crisis fueled by different forms of violence that disproportionately impact vulnerable groups including young people, women, and minorities such as the LGBTQ+ community and migrants. According to the Caribbean Public Health Agency (CARPHA), "Violence is rightly examined as a public health sector issue, because it affects physical, mental and psychosocial health, it affects the individual families, and communities."<sup>48</sup>

Haiti's is the most notable case of violence in the region, where the country has been taken hostage by powerful criminal groups with up to 80 percent of Port-au-Prince controlled by gangs. Sadly, rising levels of violence are not limited to Haiti; other Caribbean countries are grappling with higher homicide rates. According to *Insight Crime*, in recent years the Caribbean became the western hemisphere's "murder hotspot", in some cases doubling the homicide rates of crisis-torn Venezuela or renowned violent cities such as Rio de Janeiro or San Pedro Sula. In 2023, the homicide rate of St. Kitts and Nevis reached an astonishing 65.0 per 100,000 inhabitants and in Jamaica 60.9 per 100,000 inhabitants. Although important caveats need to be considered given the small population size of most Caribbean countries, regional leaders have declared the situation as highly problematic.

Young people, in particular young men, are disproportionately impacted by gang violence. Assessments from the World Bank and UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) found that young people are increasingly overrepresented among both victims and perpetrators of crime in the Caribbean region.<sup>49</sup> For example in Trinidad and Tobago, with a homicide rate of 37.6 per

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[cost-living-crisis-regional-summary-report-may-2023](#)

<sup>46</sup> Raghunath Mahabir, "Migration, Violent Extremism, and Gang Violence: A Case Study of Trinidad and Tobago", in Georginia Chami, Jerome Teelucksingh and Marlon Anatol, editors, *Managing New Security Threats in the Caribbean* (Palgrave Macmillan 2022).

<sup>47</sup> <https://help.unhcr.org/trinidadandtobago/notices/>

<sup>48</sup> <https://www.carpha.org/More/Media/Articles/ArticleID/834/Violence-in-the-Caribbean-a-Public-Health-Crisis>

<sup>49</sup> [https://scholarworks.indianapolis.iu.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/67725413-dffd-4504-b034-48cc8e64df1f/content#:~:text=Youth%20Violence%20in%20the%20Caribbean%20Community%20\(CAR](https://scholarworks.indianapolis.iu.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/67725413-dffd-4504-b034-48cc8e64df1f/content#:~:text=Youth%20Violence%20in%20the%20Caribbean%20Community%20(CAR)

100,000 inhabitants, data shows that between 2015 and 2019, of 510 people charged with homicide, 62 percent were individuals aged between 15 and 29 years of age, with 96 percent of them being males.<sup>50</sup>

The root causes of violence in the Caribbean are multiple. They include the rise of gangs throughout the region, drug, arms and human trafficking, and easy access to firearms from the United States. Poverty and societal alienation also play their part, leaving certain locations incubators for lawlessness and poverty.

The high level of violence also has an economic impact. The International Monetary Fund (IMF), notes that crime and violence among young people represents a major bottleneck to economic growth: “Weak growth reduces economic opportunities for the young, increasing their vulnerability to victimization or gang membership. These trends further hurt growth by discouraging investment through lower productivity, higher security costs and reduced competitiveness. They also divert government spending from growth-enhancing investment in health, education, and productive infrastructure, create uncertainty for businesses and investors, and cause the emigration of highly trained people.”<sup>51</sup>

Governments across the region are taking action to curb violence. These actions range from declaring nationwide states of emergencies as seen in Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago to assembling a special task force to dismantle organized crime, as well as creating special programs to tackle youth violence. Among these, CariSECURE—an initiative supported by UNDP and the United Nations, aimed at improving how government and non-government partners collect, analyze, manage, and use crime and violence data to improve policy making and citizen security programs.<sup>52</sup>

In 2023 five Caribbean countries, (Antigua and Barbuda, Belize, the Bahamas, Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago) joined Mexico’s government appeal in a civil lawsuit against U.S. gun manufacturers. This appeal corresponds to a \$10 billion lawsuit to hold U.S. gun manufacturers responsible for facilitating gun trafficking across the border.<sup>53</sup> It also underscores the importance of tackling this problem, especially as it is taking a toll on vulnerable communities. The lawsuit, however, stalled out in U.S. courts in 2024.

Gender-based violence (GBV)<sup>54</sup> against women also represents a longstanding challenge for the Caribbean. A UN Women survey show that on average 46 percent of Caribbean women have experienced at least one form of violence in her lifetime. According to data from UNODC, three of the ten highest rape rates in the world are recorded in the Caribbean, Suriname with a rate of 45.21 women rape per 100,000 women, Grenada with 30.63 per 100,000, and St. Kitts and

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[ICOM\)-The%20Caribbean%2C%20along&text=Young%20men%20are%20disproportionally%20affected,been%20affiliated%20with%20a%20gang](#); <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2017/11/13/na111417-crime-and-youth-unemployment-in-the-caribbean>

<sup>50</sup> [https://trinidadexpress.com/news/local/youths-living-in-culture-of-violence/article\\_8fb6124a-d083-11ee-ac5f-1fb85f3b95aa.html](https://trinidadexpress.com/news/local/youths-living-in-culture-of-violence/article_8fb6124a-d083-11ee-ac5f-1fb85f3b95aa.html)

<sup>51</sup> <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2017/11/13/na111417-crime-and-youth-unemployment-in-the-caribbean>

<sup>52</sup> <https://tt.usembassy.gov/u-s-embassy-launches-carisecure-2-0-project-in-trinidad-and-tobago/>; <https://www.undp.org/barbados/press-releases/barbados-tackles-youth-crime-through-carisecure-20>

<sup>53</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/legal/us-states-caribbean-nations-back-mexicos-appeal-arms-lawsuit-2023-03-22/>

<sup>54</sup> The United Nations defines GBV against women as "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life."

[https://www.who.int/health-topics/violence-against-women#tab=tab\\_1](https://www.who.int/health-topics/violence-against-women#tab=tab_1)



Nevis with 28.62 per 100,000 women.<sup>55</sup> The Gender Equality Observatory for Latin America and the Caribbean (GEO) of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) have assessed that in Latin America and the Caribbean, there is one gender-related killing of a woman every two hours—in 2022 Trinidad and Tobago stood out as one of the bloodiest Caribbean country for women, with 43 killings.<sup>56</sup>

Minorities such as the LBGTQ+ community and migrants are also victims of violence in the Caribbean. Rainbow Railroad, a global nonprofit organization that helps at-risk LGBT people, assessments LBGTQ+ people in the Caribbean have experienced high levels of direct violence in comparison to other regions of the world.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, a 2013 survey conducted by Human Rights Watch found that one in two LBGTQ+ Jamaicans have been victims of homophobic violence. Another aspect of violence in the Caribbean concerns migrants, led by Cubans, Haitians and Venezuelans. Indeed, migrants are particularly vulnerable to falling victim to crime when they move through illegal channels as they have no access to legitimate forms of employment and lack legal status or access to social protection. A 2019 CARICOM study on human trafficking estimated that between 80,000 and 120,000 persons are trafficked or smuggled through the region every year.<sup>58</sup>

Climate change is also further complicating this phenomenon, as climate internally displaced persons are subjected to human rights abuses. According to an Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) report, in the aftermath of Hurricane Dorian (2019), undocumented Haitians living on Great Abaco in the Bahamas went into hiding as they feared deportation by the Bahamian law enforcement authorities and were unable to access to public services or legal protection. Moreover, they were targeted by local organized crime.<sup>59</sup>

## 6. Recommendations

Sadly, there is not a one size fits all solution to the challenges facing Caribbean governments in improving the position of vulnerable communities. The pressures from exogenous events are often beyond the capabilities of SIDS to adequately address. Policy options therefore need to consider the use of multilateral approaches and working with external actors, such as the United States, the European Union, and other countries with an interest in the region. Considering these factors, we make the following recommendations:

- More needs to be done in coordinating regional healthcare and poverty-reduction programs, including the development of a more extensive regional support system, which should also include the United States, the Netherlands, France and the UK.
- Data collection and use needs to be upgraded by regional governments as this provides a clearer view of problems and helps governments better address the needs of vulnerable communities. There is a pressing need to have the right data on a timely basis. The World Bank conducts reviews every three to five years which gives them insights into the nature of the problem. Caribbean governments need to better understand the nature of

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<sup>55</sup> <https://dataunodc.un.org/crime-violent-offences>

<sup>56</sup> <https://www.cepal.org/en/pressreleases/2022-least-4050-women-were-victims-femicide-latin-america-and-caribbean-eclac>

<sup>57</sup> <https://www.rainbowrailroad.org/the-latest/why-are-some-countries-in-the-caribbean-dangerous-for-lgbtqi-people> ; <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/10/21/not-safe-home/violence-and-discrimination-against-lgbt-people-jamaica>

<sup>58</sup> <https://files.nettsteder.regjeringen.no/wpuploads01/sites/553/2020/11/Smuggling-of-Goods-Caribbean.pdf>

<sup>59</sup> [https://api.internal-displacement.org/sites/default/files/publications/documents/202005-displacement-in-paradise\\_FINAL.pdf](https://api.internal-displacement.org/sites/default/files/publications/documents/202005-displacement-in-paradise_FINAL.pdf)

the problem to tackle it.

- Caribbean countries must use their voices and votes in international forums to pressure the United States, China, the European Union, India and other large countries to reduce their greenhouse admissions.
- Gender-sensitive strategies and interventions in support of potential victims are a necessary instrument to prevent the exacerbation of gender inequalities. One way of addressing such needs would be the creation of a GBV committee within the government, with access to the pertinent cabinet ministers. The committee would have a clear mandate, and work with NGOs and other international organizations.
- Support for women's organizations that deal with education, employment training and refuge from domestic abuse is important. This is an area where we would strongly recommend greater interaction with the diaspora community.
- For ITPs help is needed to gain ratification of the ILO 169, which would begin the process of fully recognizing their rights. Governments should implement more inclusive policies regarding ITPs, recognition of land rights in Suriname, and in Guyana addressing some of the weaknesses of the Amerindian Act In Suriname the land-rights of ITPs still need to be acknowledged.

Both governments and the private sector need to do more to promote activities for youth as well as employment opportunities. That need extends to foreign companies active in the local economy as well as diaspora organizations. For the latter it would be a powerful gift to help youth in their former homelands as well as maintain links.