

OPINION

Caribbean island states need differentiated treatment due to COVID-19, here's why

Small island developing states (SIDS) are characterized by their exposure to a variety of risks and limited capacity to deal with them when they occur. This is particularly true in the Eastern Caribbean, being especially prone to natural disasters that are up to six times more damaging when compared to developed countries.

Now we are bracing up for yet another hurricane season, while dealing with the dramatic impacts of COVID-19.

Countries in the region have responded well on the health front, despite the global tension to access medical and protective equipment and supplies. However, the implications of the COVID-19 crisis are manifold given this region's economic, social and environmental vulnerabilities. The regularity of natural disasters – as evidenced by Dominica during the deadly 2017 hurricane season – gives countries a very narrow window of opportunity to recover and rebuild their resilience.

Economic vulnerabilities facing the Eastern Caribbean
Limited resources and economic diversification in Eastern Caribbean countries, compounded by their small size and remoteness, constrain development. Regional integration when fully

realized will contribute to widening markets, but until then doing business will call for some ingenuity.

The Caribbean has successfully used its natural patrimony to develop service-based economies, which account for as much as 75 percent of gross domestic product (GDP). Tourism can account for up to one-half of GDP and provide jobs for a similar proportion of the labor force. It is without doubt the region's most prized asset. However, with 80 percent of tourists from the US, Canada and the UK, it has become a key vulnerability with COVID-19.

Border closures and travel restrictions within the COVID-19 context have taken a toll, impacting citizens of all walks of life, from hair braiders and crafts persons on Grand Anse Beach in Grenada, to large tour operators and hoteliers on Barbados' prized West Coast. No one is exempt!

Lingering reconstruction costs of past disasters



MIA AMOR Mottley

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squeeze fiscal space to tackle COVID-19. Financing past disaster recoveries through debt has, for many, crowded out development expenditures. High public debt – domestic plus external – levels of well over 60 percent of GDP were commonplace before COVID-19 and limit fiscal space for years to come. As governments resort to fiscal stimulus measures to keep their economies afloat, COVID-19 will only add to this region's debt burden. The time for debt forgiveness is now.

Social and environmental vulnerabilities facing the Eastern Caribbean
High unemployment and aging populations, with a concomitant prevalence of non-communicable diseases (NCDs), add to this region's

troubles. Regional unemployment ranges from 10 percent to 25 percent. COVID-related job losses within the service industry will exacerbate this situation.

Aside from wasted economic potential, joblessness induced by this pandemic harbors a darker side and could further fuel a host of other socially adverse consequences.

With old age-dependency above the global average, pressures on public finances to meet the health, pension and social security commitments are high. Health systems have become further stretched by a high prevalence of NCDs. While spending on health varies across the region (between 3 percent and 7 percent of GDP), Eastern Caribbean health systems perform sub-

stantially below the global average, forcing this region on the back foot as it tackles this health crisis.

The poor and vulnerable are particularly at risk, including employees who would have lost their jobs in the tourism sector and fisherfolk belonging to vulnerable households suffering from the lockdown. Many also operate in the informal sector (accounting for as much as 40 percent of GDP), are uninsured and have difficulty accessing social protection schemes. A lot has been done in the region to protect the most vulnerable. However, Caribbean governments will require adequate fiscal space to develop effective and progressive social safety nets, as they seek to restore livelihoods and income security following this crisis.

After COVID-19, the Caribbean's needs will be far from over. Climate change – an existential threat – will continue to put significant financial strain on Caribbean countries. The need for increased investment for resilience is ever-present. The COVID-19 pandemic has made it necessary for Caribbean countries to reassess their preparedness against a wider range of increasing risks – including health pandemics. Accustomed to the impacts from natural disasters, the Caribbean will not only need resilience against global warming but also to a new wave of health risks that threaten the lives and livelihoods of its citizens.

It cannot be business as usual

Effective response demands decisive leadership and commitment from all partners around the globe to ensure that 'no one is left behind' and 'no country is left behind.'

This is why the United Nations COVID-19 Multi-sectoral Response Plan and Funding Appeal for Barbados and the Eastern Caribbean states was launched on May 6th to support the region to tackle this crisis with resources it urgently needs. This appeal will prioritize health and wellness, food security, economic recovery, social protection, education and protecting the most vulnerable.

It complements the ongoing advocacy by the SIDS nations for a differential treatment, based on their vulnerability. But the sustainability of this response will depend on solidarity and international support. A regional compact to deliver debt relief and increase resilience financing is also needed between Caribbean countries, bilateral, multi-lateral agencies and private sector. This will augur well in disrupting the vicious circle of uncertainty, debt-dependency and unrealized sustainable development potential.

• Mia Amor Mottley is the prime minister of Barbados and chair of CARICOM. Didier Trebuq is the United Nations resident coordinator for Barbados and the Eastern Caribbean.

New research indicates Abaco reef successfully withstands full force of climate change

New research published recently in *Coral Reefs*, a quarterly peer-reviewed scientific journal, documents a shallow-water coral reef in Great Abaco that can tolerate extreme warming ocean temperatures. During a research expedition led by the Perry Institute of Marine Science, scientists from the Shedd Aquarium in Chicago, SECORE International, the University of South Florida and Middlebury College examined a coral reef off Abaco that is able to thrive in conditions in which other coral reefs struggle to survive. The study uncovered genetic differences between two adjacent reefs, both dominated by mountainous star coral (*Orbicella faveolata*), which may have allowed certain corals to survive through a coral bleaching event in 2015. Their results may help inform strategies to protect and restore coral reefs in the face of rising sea temperatures from climate change.

For The Bahamas, which has more coral reef area than any other nation in the region, conserving coral reefs is vital to the country's economy, culture and livelihoods. "Coral reefs are part of the fabric of The Bahamas, harboring important fishery resources that feed the nation, are vital to the economy and protect the coastal zone where homes and tourism is concentrated," said Craig Dahlgren, Ph.D., executive director of the Perry Institute for Marine Science. "As our oceans warm from climate change, we must continue to study invaluable and fragile corals to help them persist. This new research is an essential piece of the coral

conservation puzzle."

Previous research describes climate change as the primary driver of coral reef declines across the globe. Increased sea temperatures of even about 1 degree Celsius (less than 2 degrees Fahrenheit) above usual conditions can induce coral bleaching – the collapse of a vital symbiosis between corals and microalgae, during which stressed corals expel the beneficial algae. Bleaching can result in coral death and broader ecosystem degradation. For example, coral cover has decreased by over 80 percent on Caribbean reefs since 1970.

"We know that warmer sea temperatures associated with climate change are dramatically impacting reefs globally, so with our research partners, we are working hard and working quickly to determine which corals could survive," said Roger Cuning, Ph.D., research biologist at Shedd Aquarium. "Identifying thermally tolerant reefs like the one in Great Abaco in The Bahamas is a high research priority for coral scientists and will help us determine where we should focus our conservation and reef restoration efforts."

Adaptive genes and helpful microorganisms, such as the microalgae and bacteria that live in the corals' tissues, are known to influence corals' tolerance to heat. Four groups of algae from the family Symbiodiniaceae, which commonly live within Caribbean corals, are known to provide varying levels of thermal tolerance to the corals they live with. However, knowledge gaps persist. "There's a lot that we don't know about how genetics, symbiotic microorganisms

and environmental factors work together to influence coral bleaching," said Katie Parker, research assistant at Shedd Aquarium. "We set out for answers that will help us understand how some corals might survive extreme temperatures, while others cannot, even though they're the same species."

To investigate, PIMS researchers and partners looked to corals that are thriving in an extreme, marginal environment. Mermaid Reef in Great Abaco experienced warming up to 33 degrees Celsius (91.4 degrees Fahrenheit) in 2015, beyond the temperature expected to cause bleaching. However, at this location, mountainous star corals did not bleach. Yet, extensive bleaching of this same species of corals was

observed at Sandy Cay Reef (about 18 kilometers or 11 miles south of Mermaid Reef) despite maximum temperatures of only 32 degrees Celsius (89.6 degrees Fahrenheit).

Comparing data from both locations, the researchers discovered that heat-tolerant mountainous star corals at Mermaid Reef were genetically identical and exclusively hosted one algae group (*Durudinium*), which is known to increase thermal tolerance by about 1 to 1.5 degrees Celsius. A more diverse bacterial community was found in the tissues of these corals, which may provide the corals with additional defense to heat and other stressors. Meanwhile, the mountainous star corals that bleached at Sandy Cay Reef were more genetically diverse

and they hosted a variety of algal symbiotic communities.

"The corals we studied in Mermaid Reef were presumably better suited to handle warmer water temperatures because this shallow, inshore reef regularly experiences high temperature and high light conditions, which may have selected for the hardiest corals and symbiotic algae," said Parker. "Further study of reefs like these may help us better understand how corals

acclimate and adapt to ongoing climate change."

The study suggests that certain coral communities with adaptive genetic and microbial defenses to heat stress may survive and even thrive as sea temperatures rise.

"We are hopeful that through selective breeding and propagation, heat-tolerant corals like the ones at Mermaid Reef may help optimize conservation and restoration efforts for reefs at risk," said Cuning. "But these interventions can only buy a little more time; we have to stop ocean warming in order to ensure a future with healthy coral reefs."

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