




Caribbean response to COVID-19: a regional approach to pandemic preparedness and resilience

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The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed how vulnerable small states like those in the Caribbean are to manifold threats, in this case, to global health security threats. The pandemic reached the Caribbean in March and in response, Caribbean governments implemented a series of measures to contain, mitigate and prevent the spread of the coronavirus and to reduce its financial and economic impacts on their societies. But individual Caribbean states acting on their own cannot adequately address such trans-national and trans-regional global pandemics.

Seen against this backdrop, the approach adopted by the Prime Minister of Barbados, Mia Mottley, who has been pushing the notion of a collaborative regional response via the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) in addressing the challenges posed by COVID-19, is commendable. On March 1, Mottley, as Chair of CARICOM, convened an Emergency Meeting of this intergovernmental body to develop a regional response to the unfolding global pandemic. Such a response makes sense for a number of reasons. Not all islands in the Caribbean have the healthcare facilities to address a surge in infections. Diagnostic kits, reagents and knowledge needed to perform early diagnosis are key for COVID-19 response, but the appropriate testing capabilities are lacking in some of the states. For instance, three Caribbean countries – Barbados, the Bahamas and Cayman Islands – had container loads of personal protective equipment purchased from U.S. vendors in April blocked from leaving the United States by U.S. Customs and Border Protection. But with a regional strategy some resiliency was built into the health system across the Caribbean to allow countries in need to get the assistance they required to address the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic is first and foremost a health challenge. As the regional public health agency, Caribbean Public Health Agency (CARPHA) has been performing COVID-19 tests in at least 18 Caribbean countries. The PM of St Lucia, Allen Chastanet, praised CARPHA for its actions and noted that the agency's response to the coronavirus was an example of 'regionalism working'. The CARICOM's Secretary General, Irwin LaRoche, also complimented CARPHA for its proactive approach in addressing the pandemic in the region. But COVID-19 is more than just a health challenge; it is also an economic and social challenge. Increasing evidence suggests that the pandemic has caused a complete collapse in the Caribbean's tourism industry and significant contractions in both its agricultural and distributive trade sectors. For example, Royal Caribbean

Cruises announced a monthly loss of 150 USD m to 170 USD m since the outbreak. Tackling the health challenge by shutting down the national borders of each individual Caribbean state may work for a while, but these states are so dependent on tourism for their economic survival that such a move is bound to hurt the economy of most of them. Their economies are highly dependent on maintaining open borders.

Thus, adopting a regional strategy for reopening businesses and kick-starting the economies of each Caribbean state is something that ought to be seriously considered. This is where regional bodies like the Caribbean Development Bank (CDB) can play a significant role in cushioning the effects of the inevitable economic downturn that has distressed the Caribbean region. Already the CDB has allocated USD 140 million to tackle the fallout of the COVID-19 crisis. The economic and social shock of this pandemic is going to devastate most of the islands' economies. The CDB President, Dr. Warren Smith, has projected that the coronavirus problem for Caribbean states could be exacerbated exponentially if it is accompanied by natural disasters during the upcoming hurricane season. The Caribbean needs to find a way, regionally, to build resilience into its operating system intersecting health, social, and economic sectors to deal effectively with manifold vulnerabilities. Building that resilience to external shocks requires intersectoral collaboration, strong regional institutions, and strengthened regional integration efforts.

Economic recovery, post-COVID-19, must be based not just on national policies but also on a thoughtful regional strategy. There ought to be a think tank (composed of Caribbean academics and practitioners) brought together to assist CARICOM in developing such a strategy. Re-opening airports, seaports, hotels etc. should be coordinated at the regional level. The region as a whole has to be prepared for the projected return of tourists and businesses in a post-COVID-19 world. That means coordinating a plan to take advantage of what some economists are billing as 'the post-pandemic rebound'. We believe that with leaders like Mia Mottley there is a glimmer of hope that regional integration will be strengthened as a result of this pandemic. The pandemic is indeed a cosmopolitan moment for Caribbean regional integration. Let's hope these small island states heed the call to build resilience into their regional institutions so that these countries can be better equipped to address health threats, vulnerabilities and pandemics in the future.

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