



Gender equality, disability and social inclusion in Caribbean blue economies

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The CLEAN Helpdesk aims to support the United Kingdom government's delivery of meaningful contributions to build resilience to current and future climate impacts, halt and reverse global nature loss, as well as halve global emissions.

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Guide to the report

Section 1, the Introduction, provides a general overview of the economic and human development of the region, and how climate, environment and development trends interact.

Section 2 looks at social inequities in the region, the differential wellbeing and security of work for specific groups living on coasts and working in the blue economy: informal workers, women, young people, people living with disabilities, LGBTQI+ people and others. It discusses how programming can address these inequities and precarities.

Section 3 explores the world of work and strategies for the protection and development of workers in the most climate-exposed and vulnerable natural resource-based sectors.

Section 4 describes which groups of workers in the blue economy sub-sectors are most at risk of immediate harms from interpersonal violence and labour abuses, including what to look out for and where to go for further support. This builds on general forms of risk for groups, as described in the earlier sections, to identify discrete groups of workers at highest risk of exploitative or abusive situations, and how to spot and seek help for these issues, as appropriate, in a blue economies programming context.

Section 5 provides brief good practice case studies, and Section 6 summarises the key findings and recommendations.

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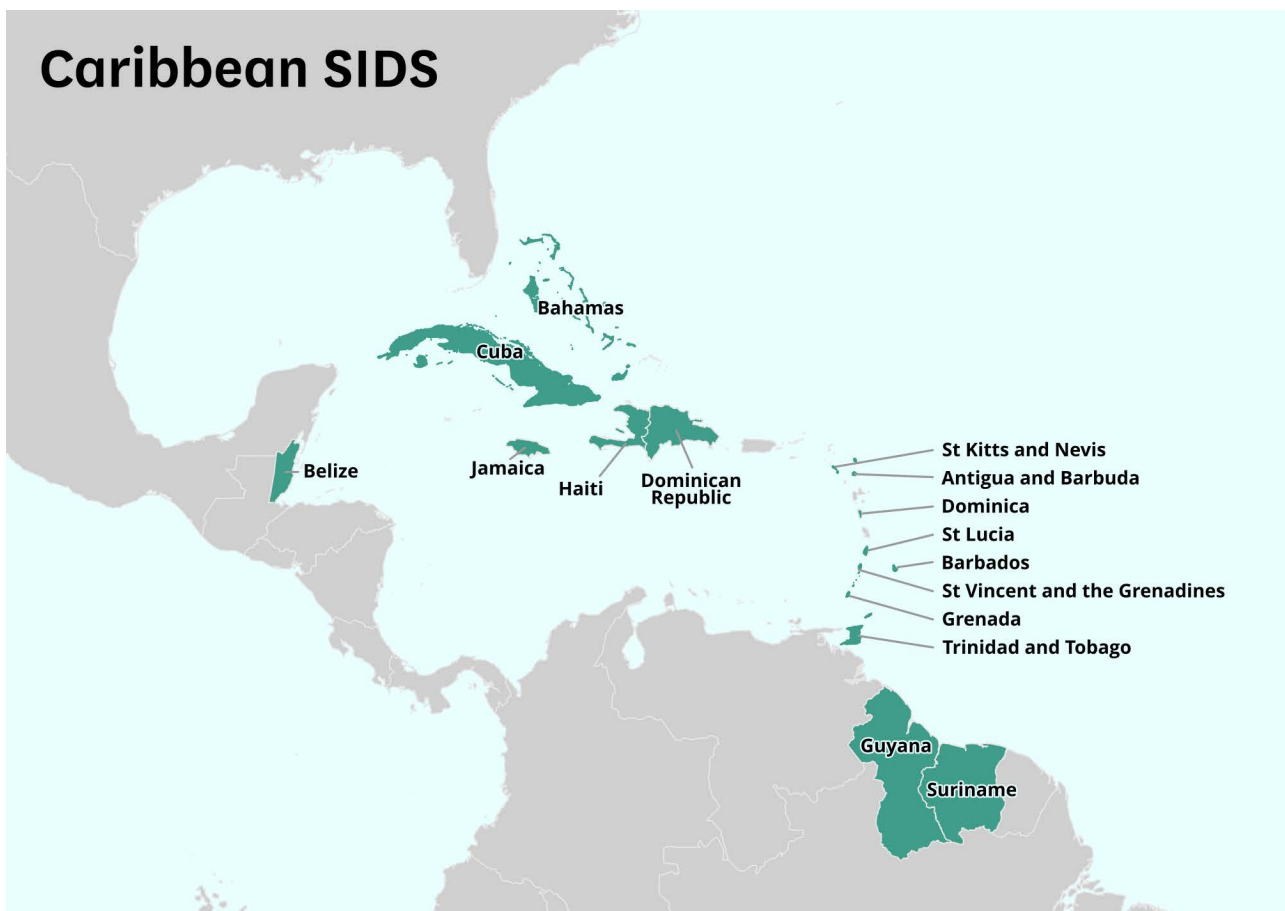
Acronyms

| | |
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| CDB | Caribbean Development Bank |
| CDEMA | Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency |
| CDKN | Climate and Development Knowledge Network |
| CRFM | Caribbean Regional Fisheries Mechanism |
| ECLAC/CEPAL | United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean/Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe |
| FAO | Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations |
| GDP | Gross Domestic Product |
| GEF | Global Environment Facility |
| GEDSI | Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion |
| ILO | International Labour Organization |
| IMO | International Maritime Organization |
| IOM | International Organization on Migration |
| IPCC | Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change |
| IPV | Intimate Partner Violence |
| IUCN | International Union for the Conservation of Nature |
| LGBTQI+ | Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex and other gender identities and sexual orientations |
| ODA | Official Development Assistance |
| ODI | The research institute formerly known as Overseas Development Institute and now rebranded as ODI Global |
| PLWD | People Living With Disability |
| OECS | Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States |
| SEAH | Sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment |
| SIDS | Small Island Developing States |
| UNDP | United Nations Development Programme |
| UNESCO | United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization |
| UNFCCC | United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change |
| UNICEF | United Nations Children’s Fund |
| UNOCHA | United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs |

Geographic scope of the report

This report covers the Small Island Developing States (SIDS) of the Caribbean. This includes the sovereign island states shown in the map below: Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Cuba, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Grenada, Haiti, Jamaica, St Kitts and Nevis, St Lucia, St Vincent and the Grenadines, and Trinidad and Tobago.

Also included are the small, low-lying coastal states of Belize, Guyana and Suriname, which are classified as SIDS because they have the same characteristics of small populations, undiversified economies and structural economic constraints.



Maps of the region ©UK Parliament and reproduced with permission for this report only

Glossary of organisations

CARICOM

The Caribbean Community or CARICOM has been in existence as a vehicle for regional integration for 50 years. Its member states are Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago. The UK overseas territory of Montserrat is also a member. Associate members are Anguilla, Bermuda, British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands, Curaçao, Turks and Caicos.

CARIFORUM

The Caribbean Forum (CARIFORUM) is a subgroup of the **Organisation of African, Caribbean and Pacific States** and serves as a base for economic dialogue with the **European Union**. It was established in 1992. Its members are the members of the Caribbean Community (listed above) plus the Dominican Republic.

Caribbean countries and territories eligible for ODA

Countries and territories eligible for official development assistance (ODA) according to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in the Caribbean region are: Belize, Cuba, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Grenada, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Saint Lucia and Suriname. (The UK Overseas Territory Montserrat will remain eligible until it graduates in 2026.)

Other countries and territories in the Caribbean region

Although Cuba is not a member of the Caribbean bodies mentioned above, relevant statistical profiles and information related to gender equality, disability and social inclusion in blue economy development are also available for Cuba. These are included selectively, and with clear references as such, in sections of this report.

Information pertaining to the US, UK, Netherlands and French overseas territories (e.g., the US Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, Netherlands Antilles, the French departments of Guadeloupe and Martinique) is excluded from the analysis, except when information from CARICOM associate members is explicitly included in CARICOM sources. These territories are exempt from ODA eligibility.



Photo credit: A group of fishermen along west coast of Martinique, Caribbean Sea. T photography / Shutterstock.com

1

Introduction

Purpose of the report

This report aims to provide guidance for sustainable blue economy programming in the Caribbean Small Island Developing States (SIDS) region.

The report focuses especially on gender equality, social inclusion and safeguarding issues, and how these are, in many cases, entwined with climate and environmental degradation. The report:

- provides an overview of key structural inequalities relevant to the sustainable blue economy and its development in the Caribbean;
- explores opportunities for addressing social inequities, reducing risks and empowering marginalised groups as part of sustainable blue economy investments; and
- highlights vital considerations for safeguarding and avoidance of harm.

For the purposes of this report, the blue economy refers to economic activities in coastal and marine areas of Caribbean SIDS.

Context

The socioeconomic context

Caribbean SIDS have social and economic structural features that create risks and challenges for development. These intersect with and are often compounded by the impacts of climate and environmental hazards.

Caribbean states suffer from income inequality, with many of them classified by the World Bank or United Nations as highly unequal and some as moderately-to-highly unequal (World Bank, u.d./a and UNOCHA).¹ Haiti has high absolute numbers and a markedly high proportion of people living in poverty, by both national and global standards.

Income poverty and inequality has a gender dimension: Caribbean women suffer a gender gap in terms of their economic participation and access to decent work.² Furthermore, informal work is pervasive across the Caribbean economies. Informal workers lack contracts, occupational health and safety protections and social safety nets such as sick and disability pay, parental leave and pensions.

The demographic trend of the region overall is toward an ageing population, as a result of what is known as the ‘demographic transition’: the reduction in fertility rates and increase in people’s life expectancies (Quashie et al., 2018). This has consequences for the incidence of disability in the population, the participation of people living with disabilities in the labour force, disability support at work, and social protection.³

Economic activity in agriculture and fishing make up a small proportion of GDP in most Caribbean SIDS. It should be noted that agriculture and fishing, including agroforestry, wild fish harvest and aquaculture, are normally reported in the aggregate in governmental statistics, making it hard to access data for the sub-sectors. Their small nominal share of the economy in most Caribbean SIDS stands in contrast to historic colonial production patterns, which were dominated by plantation economies of a single or dual nature (e.g., bananas, sugar). Since independence, most Caribbean SIDS have shifted away from their heavy reliance on monocultural crop production and pivoted into services, heavy industry and/or manufacturing; some have developed extractive economies, as detailed below.

Agricultural revenues have been deeply affected by volatility in world commodity prices, such as sugar (Maitah and Smutka, 2019). In the case of bananas, Caribbean output has been undercut by lower priced Latin American producers. Agricultural productivity is also highly vulnerable to extreme weather, and many islands have seen agricultural production razed by intense hurricanes in recent years (FAO and CDB, 2019). For example, the consecutive Category 5 tropical storms Irma and Maria that hit the Caribbean in 2017 devastated agricultural production on some islands: Dominica lost 100% of crops and suffered “substantial destruction to productive trees and death of livestock”, from which it continues to recover (ACAPS et al., 2017: 5).

1 Where income inequality is measured by the Gini index: The Gini index measures the extent to which the distribution of income or consumption among individuals or households within an economy deviates from a perfectly equal distribution. A Gini index of 0 represents perfect equality, while an index of 100 implies perfect inequality. The World Bank classifies countries with a Gini index over 40 as highly unequal. Antigua and Barbuda (according to UNOCHA, 2021), Grenada, Guyana, Haiti, St Lucia and Trinidad and Tobago all have Gini indices over 40, and Belize, Jamaica and Suriname are at 39. Barbados shows somewhat lower levels of inequality at 34. Not all Caribbean countries are measuring and reporting. A table of countries showing data is published at: [Gini index - Latin America & Caribbean | Data https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI?locations=ZJ](https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI?locations=ZJ)

2 Decent work has a formal definition by the International Labour Organization as: “Decent work sums up the aspirations of people in their working lives. It involves opportunities for work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for all, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organise and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men” (ILO, u.d.)

3 The population pyramids for countries of the region show a classic pyramid shape only for Haiti, the Dominican Republic and Turks and Caicos Islands; other Caribbean SIDS’ pyramids show that the cohort of children is the same size or less than that of older generations: CIA Population Pyramids by Region (u.d.).

On some islands, farm labourers still make up a notable proportion of the workforce. At one end of the spectrum, Haiti stands out as still being a predominantly agricultural economy as well as the poorest in the region: half its workforce is in agriculture, primarily as smallholder farmers, and one quarter of GDP is in agriculture (IFC, 2024). On St Lucia, banana workers still make up 10% of the labour force and on Dominica, banana workers are one third of the labour force, and farming and fishing constitutes 14% of GDP (ibid).

In most Caribbean SIDS, agriculture and fishing are less than 2% of GDP and workers in these sectors comprise a minimal portion of the labour force (Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Cuba, St Kitts and Nevis, Trinidad and Tobago). It should be noted, however, that official GDP figures do not capture informal fisheries and farming work. By definition, informal work is hard to quantify.

Even if not reflected fully in official statistics, fishing can be of great localised economic, social and cultural importance in coastal communities. Fishing is not viewed purely as a vocation, but as a way of life in many coastal communities and is associated with substantial social networks and social capital (Forster et al., 2022). Fishers and their specific vulnerabilities are taken up in greater detail in the following sections.

Domestically caught seafood does play a role in food security in the Caribbean, but perhaps surprisingly, the Caribbean is still a significant importer of seafood. The governments of the Caribbean region have been criticised for lack of investment in the fisheries sector, and the fisheries of the traditional commercial species are considered to be at or near their limits (CRFM, 2013).

Food and nutrition insecurity is a concerning issue in the Caribbean: around 67.5% of the population live in moderate or severe food insecurity, compared with 27.6% in the global population, although with marked concentrations of malnutrition and insecurity in certain areas (Mohammadi et al., 2022).⁴ The drivers of food insecurity are complex and include vulnerability to external environmental and economic shocks that affect the production and distribution of food, as well as weak enablers of sustainable production, such as knowledge systems, for small-scale producers (ibid).

In a select few Caribbean SIDS with oil, gas and critical mineral deposits, export revenues are dominated by these high-value commodities, or are becoming increasingly so. Trinidad and Tobago has been a major oil and gas producer in the region for decades, and its economy is heavily weighted toward both extraction and refining (Government of Trinidad and Tobago, u.d.) Discoveries of oil and gas in the Suriname-Guyana Basin are beginning to shift the economic prospects of the SIDS concerned, enabling them to cancel foreign debts and potentially unlock more revenues for national development, although at an environmental price. Suriname has discovered offshore oil reserves and its production is expected to start in 2028 (World Bank, u.d./b; GeoExpro, u.d.); Guyana discovered oil reserves in 2015 and began drilling in 2019, leading to a sharp upturn in its GDP (World Bank, u.d./c). Suriname has significant gold deposits, with gold generating a three-quarters share of export revenues. While these riches appear to be a blessing, the economic reliance on oil, gas and minerals also means that these countries are highly vulnerable to price volatility in international commodity markets.

⁴ Mohammadi et al.'s analysis (2022) shows that food insecurity is particularly severe in Haiti (above 10% of the population) but also elevated (5–10% of the population) in Belize, Jamaica, the Dominican Republic, Dominica, St Vincent and Grenadines, Trinidad and Tobago.

Several Caribbean SIDS have mature financial services industries (The Bahamas, Antigua and Barbuda), while others are endeavouring to diversify into telecommunications, instrument assembly and biotechnology (Dominican Republic, Cuba). For all Caribbean SIDS, tourism is a sector of paramount importance, as measured by its significance for foreign exchange earnings, by proportion of GDP and by proportion of the national workforce.

Caribbean SIDS vary in their trends for tourism growth: the low-lying coastal SIDS (e.g. Suriname, Guyana, Belize) and Dominica, which lags behind its neighbours in developing non-agriculture sources of income, are still seeking to grow their tourism sectors from a relatively immature base and often in specialist areas such as eco-tourism. In other Caribbean SIDS, the tourism industry is very well established and comprises a combination of “stay over” tourists, who generate more revenues locally and nationally, and cruise ship tourists, whose spending accrues primarily to multinational companies. The exception is Haiti, where violence and instability since 2021 has stalled the growth of tourism, and where further stabilisation is needed to reignite the industry (World Bank, 2024).

The structural constraints on SIDS, including their high debt burdens, lack of economic diversification and high reliance on global supply chains for critical food and equipment, permeate and deeply affect their efforts to develop their economies more sustainably and with resilience in mind. Public debt in the Caribbean SIDS averages 74% of GDP, above the maximum 60% of GDP benchmark widely used as an indicator of debt sustainability for developing countries (Hurley, 2024; Hurley et al., 2025).

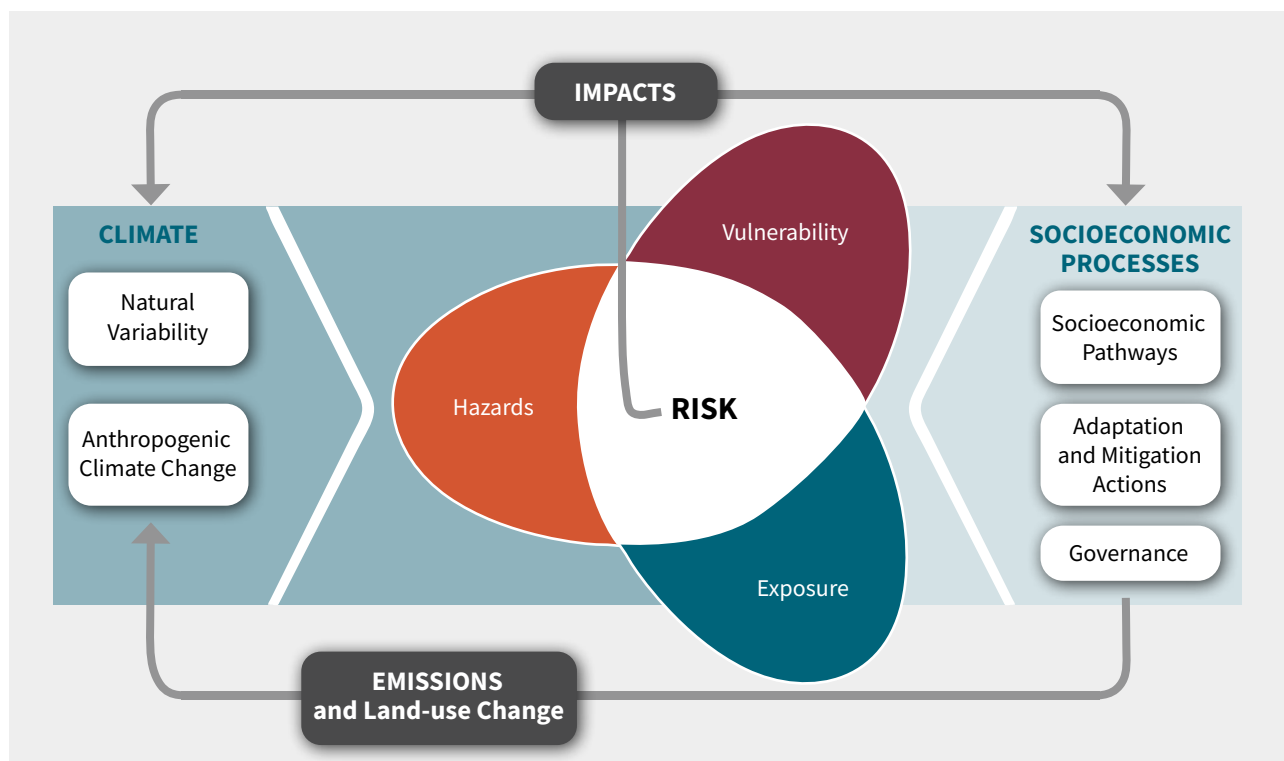
The climate and environmental context

The Caribbean SIDS are highly exposed to the Atlantic hurricane belt, with its intense annual storms and related storm surges, and to human drivers of ecosystem degradation such as agricultural pollution, illegal fishing and reef damage. Drought and water scarcity are becoming increasingly prevalent as a consequence of climate change (Mycoo et al., 2022), which is complicated by heavy water demand from such industries as tourism.

All of these features – social, economic and environmental – interact and provide the context for development, including blue economy development.

Development interventions in Caribbean SIDS must identify the specific elements of **exposure** and **vulnerability** faced by different social and economic population groups, as well as the changing intensity and frequency of climate and environmental **hazards**, so that interventions adequately address the root causes of **risk**. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) visualised these relationships as a Venn diagram (see Figure 1). Risk-informed development assures a more sustainable and adaptive development pathway (Opitz-Stapleton et al., 2019).

Figure 1: Risk of climate-related impacts from the interaction of climate-related hazards with the vulnerability and exposure of human and natural systems.



Source: IPCC (2014) AR5 Summary for Policy Makers

“SIDS are inherently and uniquely vulnerable to exogenous shocks owing to, inter alia, their small size, geographical remoteness, highly dispersed populations, the limited scale and undiversified nature of their economies, high dependence on external markets, and extreme exposure to disasters and natural hazards, and the effects of climate change. Recognising vulnerability does not mean that SIDS exhibit weakness or lack potential for development. Rather, it means recognising that they are disproportionately impacted in terms of physical destruction and noneconomic and economic losses to a far greater scale than elsewhere.”

Statement of the SIDS4 Summit: The Antigua and Barbuda Agenda for SIDS, 2024.

Methodology

The methodology for this review comprised three parts, following the standard process adopted by ODI Global for rapid evidence reviews (Hagen-Zenker and Mallett, 2013). It began with a keyword search on EBSCO and Google Scholar. EBSCO is an aggregated database of databases, providing access to STM Source, Business Source Corporate Plus, Environment Complete, Humanities Source, Political Science Complete, and SOCIndex.

The keyword search strings included: Gender equality AND Caribbean; Women's rights AND Caribbean; Women's economic empowerment AND Caribbean; Women fisherfolk AND Caribbean; Regional gender policy AND Caribbean; Violence against children AND Caribbean; Labour abuse AND Caribbean; Human trafficking AND Caribbean; tenure systems AND Caribbean; and country-specific search terms where necessary. We set the parameters to capture all academic articles, book chapters, and PhD theses and to focus on the last 20 years. We prioritised works from the past decade, where possible, but noted that many of the most relevant results were 10–20 years old.

From this, we pursued a snowball method, a process that “involves actively seeking advice on relevant publications in a particular field, or on a particular topic from key experts – which will then be reviewed – and subsequently looking at the reference lists of those publications” (Hagen-Zanker and Mallett, 2013: 10). We interviewed or consulted informally in person and by email, with a small number of Caribbean experts working in gender and social inclusion (see annex for named individuals). We also took in specific suggestions and recommendations by expert reviewers on two earlier drafts of this paper (see annex for reviewers).

Further, the authors drew on their own collective 15+ years of working in the Caribbean region and following up key reference documents, policy documents and grey literature to which they had access. This incorporated, within the limited timeframe available, “relevant material [that] is often located outside the orthodox peer review channels (that is, academic databases, journals). Failing to incorporate a way of retrieving this material into the search strategy means you are unlikely to capture all available research – in particular, research referred to as grey literature, such as working papers, concept notes, donor reports, policy documents and briefings” (Hagen-Zanker and Mallett, 2013; 11).



Curacao Fishermen, Mahi Mahi Fish Caribbean

2

Social inequalities make some people more vulnerable

Governance (policies, regulations, economic incentives), operations and management, and social behaviours can reduce the exposure and vulnerability of different groups of people to climate and environmental hazards. Governance, operations and management can also increase people's vulnerability if it is blind to gender and social inequities. For this reason, programmatic interventions **must address GEDSI adequately in situational analysis, programme design, implementation, monitoring, evaluation and learning**. Without doing so, development programmes risk deepening inequities, maladapting to climate and environmental change, and causing harm.

Key questions addressed in this section include:

- What data is available in the Caribbean region that may be used for gender equality, disability and social inclusion (GEDSI) analysis for sustainable blue economy development, and what are the data gaps?
- What are specific risks to the multidimensional development and wellbeing of specific groups of people in the blue economy, including women, young people, the elderly, people living with disabilities, ethnic minorities, Indigenous people and LGBTQI+ people?
- How should programme managers use existing guidance to address GEDSI in all stages of the programme cycle and increase resilience for all groups of people?
- Who are the key stakeholders to engage on GEDSI and why? What work is already going on to address poverty and vulnerability and empower groups?

Box 1: Key concepts in gender equality, disability and social inclusion

GEDSI comprises three closely related and equally important concepts:

- Gender equality aims to remove the unequal power relations between different gender identities in the pursuit of equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities for all.
- Disability inclusion is the process of ensuring the meaningful participation of persons with disabilities in all their diversity and ensuring the promotion and mainstreaming of their rights.
- Social inclusion is the process of improving the terms on which individuals and groups take part in society, improving the ability, opportunity, and dignity of those who are disadvantaged on the basis of their identity.

All new UK International Climate Finance (ICF) programmes must be “GEDSI empowering” at a minimum. They should consider the inclusion and empowerment of people with disabilities in their design and delivery. Detailed guidance is available in the ICF Guidance Note for Delivery Partners.



Source: UK International Climate Finance Guidance Note for Delivery Partners: Integration of Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion (May 2025) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-international-climate-finance-icf-gender-equality-disability-and-social-inclusion-guidance>

See also: Checklist for Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion Across Economic Development Programmes (2025): <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/checklist-for-gender-equality-disability-and-social-inclusion-gedsi-across-fcdo-programmes>

Some groups are more vulnerable to shocks and less resilient in recovery than others

Across the Caribbean region, there is a diverse landscape of poverty and wellbeing. Most countries in the region are ranked in the “high” or “very high” human development category by the United Nations, while Suriname and Haiti rank as “medium”. Haiti, which is also a least developed country (as defined by the UN), has been subjected to chronic political instability and institutional fragility, and frequent environmental shocks. These overlapping challenges perpetuate a state of crisis, and have created entrenched poverty, which has fueled high levels of outmigration, leaving a regional footprint.

Notwithstanding the appearance of advanced socioeconomic development in many Caribbean SIDS, structural features lead to the economic poverty of various groups of people and deprive them of the rights and social support necessary to lead dignified and secure lives. People’s vulnerabilities and the counterpart – their capabilities – contribute to the broader fabric of their multidimensional wellbeing.

The proportion of people living below the national poverty line varies considerably across the Caribbean SIDS region, as discussed above. People's ability to escape poverty and live in economic security is shaped by a range of factors, including attendance in school and quality of education, the availability of jobs, decency/precarity of work, and work-life balance, including unpaid care work in the home and community.

Social norms, including discriminatory attitudes and behaviours, play a strong role in shaping these aspects of people's economic participation and wellbeing. Social norms also contribute directly to people's quality of life (or lack thereof). Meanwhile, the degree to which people have voice in decision-making, whether in households, communities, firms or in broader public policy, is critical to the representation of their development priorities and concerns, the realisation of their goals and aspirations, and their multidimensional well-being.

Naturally, poverty and wellbeing are not static, but dynamic. At the individual and aggregate level, they are linked to endogenous factors such as demographic trends (e.g., ageing and rural-urban migration), national and subnational policy levers and investments; and exogenous factors, such as the terms of trade and official development assistance (ODA), and climate and environmental shocks.

Climate and environmental shocks can have a more catastrophic effect on those who are already geographically exposed to them and more socially and economically vulnerable than those who are not. For example, Caribbean SIDS are in the hurricane belt and highly exposed to tropical storms but certain people are more exposed than others, such as communities living in precarious housing very close to coastlines or on flood plains, or workers working offshore.

Discriminatory social norms create further vulnerabilities for certain groups during and in the aftermath of climate- or environment-related events. For instance, if communities are evacuated to storm shelters, women and girls and/or identifiably LGBTQI+ people are likely to be at higher risk of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (SEAH) if safeguards are missing. People living with disability may be less able to access early warning systems and less able to access support to evacuate. People's physiological characteristics in some cases make them more vulnerable to hazards; for example, pregnant women, unborn babies and small infants, while the elderly are particularly at risk of health complications from heatwaves. Caribbean SIDS have considerable knowledge to target and address such vulnerabilities; but may lack the knowledge management and information systems, human resources and development finance to do so adequately (Lindsay et al., 2024).

Economic poverty and discriminatory social norms may intersect to reduce people's resilience and impede their recovery from disasters (Bangalore et al., 2017). For example, low-income households with few economic assets and an inability to secure insurance are more likely to be left destitute if their dwellings and livelihood assets, such as boats, are destroyed. In order to be listed on a state's social protection database for payouts, people are required to be a registered employee or business owner. Many are not registered for state social protection because they are casual contract workers (e.g. day labourers) or family members working in small businesses (often young people, women, and undocumented migrants). Meanwhile, in both a routine development context and in disaster recovery scenarios, women are discriminated against when seeking loans, and especially so if they are single (unmarried or widowed).

Many people’s wellbeing is also shaped by the intangible facets of their social and physical environments, which confer important aesthetic, recreational, cultural and spiritual values. The Caribbean’s coastal-marine environment and the region’s deep roots in African cultures underpin vibrant music, dance, arts and cuisine, all of which are deeply important to its people, creating pride and cultural identity. The Indigenous people and distinct ethnic groups of the Caribbean SIDS also have specific cultural, religious and spiritual traditions with connections to terrestrial and coastal-marine environments and the physical and ecological features of the environment, including its biodiversity.

While many climate risk assessments have been undertaken for various sectors of Caribbean economies, and on a piecemeal basis for some social and socioeconomic groups, information is not easy to find. A 2024 study interviewed more than 50 development practitioners across SIDS, predominantly in the Caribbean, and concluded: “Stakeholders working to advance climate change adaptation and resilience in SIDS find that the information they need is incomplete, inaccessible, and poorly presented. Disaggregated climate risk and impact information about groups facing inequality on the basis of gender, ethnicity, indigeneity and income is especially needed” (Lindsay et al., 2024). The study further highlighted the need for high-quality knowledge management systems in the Caribbean and other SIDS regions that can collect, curate and publish such differentiated risk and vulnerability information, so that it may be better applied in policy-making and programming.

Gender inequality: a complex picture in the region

Women and girls lead on educational attainment but fall behind on economic development

The landscape of gender (in)equality is complex in the Caribbean region and requires an analysis well beyond headline statistics. By some measures of gender equality, women’s development appears to be high or ahead of men’s. However, this can be misleading as composite gender indices mask inequalities that should be addressed through gender-responsive and gender-transformative programming.

The Gender Development Index is the difference in human development values between females and males and is a composite of statistics for life expectancy, expected and mean years of schooling, and per capita income. A value of “1” represents complete parity by these measures; under 1 indicates that women experience less equity, and over 1 indicates that men experience less equity. Several countries of the region have values over 1, indicating that women seem to lead on development progress. However, evaluation of the component parts reveals a far more nuanced and interesting story:

- **Women and girls are on average completing more schooling than men and boys in the Caribbean:** The expected years of schooling (Sustainable Development Goal, SDG target 4.3) and mean years of schooling (SDG target 4.4) values (in years) are higher for women and girls than for men and boys.

- **Women are living longer on average than men in the Caribbean:** The average life expectancy is higher for women than for men. However, it should be noted that Haiti's life expectancy for both sexes is markedly below the regional average.
- **Women are not translating their educational advantage into economic security:** Women's economic empowerment is far behind men's. The per capita income is higher for men than for women, sometimes significantly higher in selected Caribbean countries.

A different index, the Gender Inequality Index, measures reproductive health, political empowerment and labour market participation. Data for all countries worldwide shows that when a country's overall human development is higher, women's progress on these measures is also more advanced. That said, Caribbean SIDS in the "very high" and "high" human development categories score worse for gender equality and women's empowerment on the Gender Inequality Index than the average of other countries in the same categories. The reason is that women's labour market participation is pushing the scores down. The exception is Cuba, whose gender equality score is better than average for its development category. In the medium human development category, Suriname scores better than the average of other countries in the category, and Haiti scores much worse.

It is also important to stress that the smaller Caribbean island states are not managing to report all statistics, which means that they return nil values for the Gender Development Index and/or the Gender Inequality Index. This is the case for Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, Grenada, St Kitts and Nevis, and St Vincent and Grenadines. It is only the SIDS with larger populations that are managing to report.

Drivers and consequences of gender inequality

The paradox of women having more mean years of schooling and yet lower incomes can in large part be explained by the heavy unpaid care work that falls unevenly on women in the region (UN Women Caribbean, 2025). It is also possible that educated women are leaving their countries to pursue opportunities, although the gender-specific dimensions of the Caribbean "brain drain" have not been well studied.

A very high proportion of households are female headed in the region and most of these are unmarried women with children, i.e., women who never marry the father of their children. There is an established pattern of unstable unions and male migration (migration that occurs principally among the Caribbean states). Adult women and adolescent girls may have a range of dependents to support – children, elderly relatives and non-economically active adults. Single or unmarried women are far less likely than married women to have access to bank accounts and credit. Expectations around care work plus women's low economic empowerment create structural constraints on women's workforce participation and professional advancement, since they may be unable to access childcare and eldercare. They may even be forced into part-time and precarious work to fit around family commitments that fall unevenly to them.

These patterns also highlight intersectionality, which applies to people who have more than one characteristic that constrains their development in the social context. As shown here, being a woman, and also being single/unmarried, is an intersecting vulnerability in most Caribbean socioeconomic contexts when it comes to the workplace and access to financial services.

These elements of gender equality and intersecting inequalities have implications for people's wellbeing on a daily basis and over their life course. They have particular implications for people's resilience against climate shocks such as intense hurricanes, flooding, storm surges and droughts, which are increasingly affecting the Caribbean islands. Women on average have fewer financial savings to rely upon and more dependents to look after in the event of such climate-related crises. Their lack of economic empowerment may make them more vulnerable to falling into poverty as a result of both endogenous and exogenous shocks and may make it more challenging for women to recover (bounce back) from shocks. This vulnerability is all the greater for informal workers, and for the subset of people who are informal workers and/or living with disability and/or women and/or single and/or migrant (especially Haitian migrants). People with these characteristics face multiple forms of discrimination and lack of access to social protection, banking and credit. Context-specific analysis and targeted interventions are required, often involving the collaborative efforts of multiple agencies.

Blue economy programmes may have some mandate to offer worker benefits to staff and contractors, including people in these categories who are especially economically disadvantaged. Blue economy programmes may also be able to signpost women towards sources of support for social protection schemes (see Good Practice Case Studies, Section 5). In this way, blue economy programmes are not themselves direct social security providers, but play a key role in linking women to relevant services.

Key sources of guidance for GEDSI through the programme cycle

Programme interventions in the blue economies of Caribbean SIDS must be based on thorough situation analyses, bespoke to each project and its locations, which assess the specific forms of capabilities and vulnerabilities available to the different groups of people working and living there.

It is vital to employ local and national GEDSI experts to guide this assessment and project-specific recommendations and design elements, to embed appropriate, ambitious GEDSI objectives and performance indicators. That said, programme managers should ensure that GEDSI awareness and ambition is fully mainstreamed in their own and their teams' ethic and working approach.

In addition to the UK government guidance referenced above (Box 1: Key concepts in Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion), a bespoke guide for the Eastern Caribbean has been published by the OECS Commission, with many inspiring regional examples: *Bringing Resilience with Nature and Gender*, <https://pressroom.oecs.int/oecs-commission-launches-toolkit-on-building-resilience-with-nature-and-gender-to-mark-world-environment-day-2020>

The uneven allocation of unpaid care work in Caribbean countries, the heavy expectation that women will be the sole family caregivers, the high incidence of female-headed households, and women's lower economic development and access to financial services have implications for programming. General guidelines for programmes are as follows:

- **Facilitate access to state social security.** Engaging women through formal working arrangements (contracts), when they prefer it, may facilitate women's registration for state social security benefits for them and their dependents (e.g., children). This is likely to be of high importance to women employees. Arrangements for employee enrolment in social security systems may vary by country and should be checked carefully.
- **Adopt flexible and adaptive operational policies in respect of workshops, events and other programmatic activities, to be explicitly family-friendly and create expectations that both men and women should balance work and family responsibilities.** On an organisational or programmatic basis, managers can institute human resource policies and take operational measures to accommodate employees' challenges around balancing work and home responsibilities. These may include offering flexible working hours and scheduling work meetings and other obligations with sensitivity to women's caregiving responsibilities. For example, managers may wish to explicitly schedule meetings and trips when employees have childcare cover.

Such policies and their implementation may in reality be particularly accommodating of the unequal care pressures that women face in contemporary Caribbean society, and in this sense sit just above "minimal compliance", at the "gender-sensitive" or "responsive" rather than "transformative" end of the spectrum

However, such policies and their communication have the potential to shift toward more transformative change if programme leaders label such policies and practices as appropriate for male staff and contractors, too, and urge men to engage meaningfully with them. Making such policies "for everyone" can help to nudge social norms and expectations around work-life balance toward a more equal assumption of domestic responsibilities by all. It is likely that structural features around childcare provision in Caribbean societies and the rights and wellbeing of domestic workers (typically female) are far beyond the footprint of blue economy programming and may constrain the potential for blue economy programmes to be truly transformational in this domain. However, social norm change is still firmly within reach.

- **Commit to thorough and ongoing workforce education on unconscious biases.** Many of the barriers to gender equality in the Caribbean are borne of unequal expectations of women's and men's roles in society or unequal standards. Social norms are not easily or rapidly changed, but can be appropriately addressed in the programme and organisational context. This is possible by explicitly embracing values around diversity and mutual respect in teams. Programme managers can hold regular awareness and training sessions on spotting and eliminating unconscious biases experienced by various social groups. Good practice calls for at least one designated gender or GEDSI lead within the senior management team of any organisation or programme to champion and hold ultimate accountability for such measures.



It can be a matter of choice (depending on the GEDSI lead's lived experience and professional background) for them to deliver programme training and/or link with external partners with specialist expertise. Of interest in this regard is the work of the specialist group WeTalkingBois (see Section 5), which addresses masculinities in Caribbean society.

- **Eliminate any gender pay gaps.** In light of existing economic gaps between women and men in the Caribbean, it is especially pressing that a “gender pay gap” audit is conducted rigorously and often at the organisational and/or programmatic level to ensure that women and men obtain equal pay for equal work.
- **Conduct regular audits of leadership make-up and address any gender imbalances.** Although gender balance in political participation and public policy leadership is relatively favourable in the Caribbean compared to other world regions, the economic and social constraints faced by women impair their roles in leadership. This is especially the case for women who face intersecting inequalities such as those associated with marital status, ethnicity/Indigeneity, low-income background and other factors. It is appropriate to conduct regular audits on the gender balance of leadership in programmes and to seek diverse representation of perspectives and backgrounds. To give women the chance to become real leaders and not just symbolic leaders, it may be appropriate to offer leadership coaching or mentoring to women to build their confidence in these roles (GLOW, 2024).
- **Find out about, and signpost to, sources of help and support for people suffering domestic or intimate partner violence.** People from all walks of life can suffer from domestic or intimate partner violence and, due to social norms, may hold back from seeking help and protection. They may also legitimately wish to find support in utmost secrecy because they fear provoking further violence from the perpetrator. Providing specialist support services for sufferers is unlikely to be in the direct mandate of a blue economy development programme. However, it is highly appropriate for programmes to signpost to in-country services that can guide sufferers to the right support. Good practice involves placing information in areas such as toilets/sanitary and rest facilities where it may be safely and easily accessed, and which also normalises the idea of seeking support.

As stated previously, **there is no substitute for a project- or programme-specific gender, disability and social inclusion assessment** at baseline of any intervention, which should identify specific forms of inequality, discrimination and exclusion for specific groups of people. Any project- or programme-specific GEDSI assessment will identify more bespoke risk areas for different groups and mitigation measures. The above measures are particularly relevant in Caribbean SIDS based on the region-wide GEDSI review given here.

Violence against women and children

Intimate partner violence is widespread across Caribbean society

Overall, Caribbean women suffer a higher rate of gender-based violence (GBV) than other countries with similar human development rankings. Just as in other world regions, these forms of violence are unacceptably high in the Caribbean. Globally, gender-based violence has been dubbed a silent pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2021).

Gender-based violence includes physical violence and rape as well as psychologically coercive and controlling behaviours, many of which are not reported due to a culture of shame and intimidation on the part of the sufferer. Women’s rights leaders and gender equality champions also point to a pervasive cultural normalisation of sexual harassment and the persistence of high rates of teenage pregnancy (Casinelli, 2023).

There is widespread recognition that ingrained gender norms harm both women and men in Caribbean societies, but in different ways: “Traditional gendered roles inform male vulnerability to involvement in violence and organised crime, women and girls are made vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse” (UN Women Caribbean, u.d.) Civil society groups in Caribbean SIDS continue to urge their governments to legislate against gender-based violence and various forms of sexual harassment where such laws are missing, and to expand the provision of shelters and support services for sufferers, along with public education (Casinelli, 2023).

Data on physical and sexual intimate partner violence (IPV) among ever-married/partnered women aged 15 years and older is only available for a sub-set of Caribbean SIDS, giving only a general picture of trends, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Intimate partner violence in selected Caribbean countries

Country prevalence estimates of lifetime and past 12 months physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence (IPV) among ever married/partnered women aged 15–49 years, 2018

| Country | Lifetime IPV point estimate (%) | Past 12 months IPV point estimate (%) |
|---------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Belize | 24% | 8% |
| Cuba | 14% | 5% |
| Dominican Republic | 19% | 10% |
| Grenada | 28% | 8% |
| Guyana | 31% | 10% |
| Haiti | 23% | 12% |
| Jamaica | 24% | 7% |
| Suriname | 28% | 8% |
| Trinidad and Tobago | 28% | 7% |

| Country | Lifetime IPV point estimate (%) | Past 12 months IPV point estimate (%) |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| For comparative purposes | | |
| Latin America and Caribbean region | 25% | 8% |
| Sub-Saharan Africa region | 33% | 20% |
| East Asia sub-region | 20% | 7% |
| Southern Asia sub-region | 35% | 19% |
| Global average | 27% | 13% |

Source: WHO (2021), ANNEX 6.

The landscape of gender-based inequalities and manifestations of violence against women is well summarised by the Secretary General of CARICOM, who said:

“Even as the region moves towards ‘equality for all’, there are many challenges to be overcome. Data indicate that fewer women than men in the region are earning incomes, unpaid care work is still predominantly done by women and girls, and gender-based violence continues with great intensity. This reflects the continued presence of cultural beliefs, norms and practices that underpin social exclusion and inequalities.”

*Dr Carla Barnett, Secretary General of CARICOM,
speech on International Women’s Day, 2024 (CARICOM, 2024).*

Key sources of guidance for addressing violence against women

Increase community-based services for sufferers of domestic violence. Good practices for addressing gender-based violence include funding for civil society-based providers of services to affected women and children, who are in communities and can offer access close to where people live. The EU-funded Spotlight initiative was a multi-country initiative to address violence against women, and had a substantial Caribbean component. It operated a small grant programme “to Scale-up Technical Substantive Capacity of Caribbean CSOs” that did exactly this, along with providing technical capacity support to governmental institutions. Links on the project webpage contain useful advice and guidance that is highly tailored to the region: <https://caribbean.unwomen.org/en/stories/news/2022/05/caribbean-spotlight-initiative-small-grants-to-scale-up-technical-substantive-capacity-of-caribbean-csos>



Key sources of guidance for addressing violence against women

Take a multi-pronged approach to service provision and interventions on domestic violence.

According to the UN Multi Country Office for the Caribbean, which has ongoing programmes across the region, it is essential to continue multi-faceted interventions to shift harmful norms and power inequities that lead to harmful behaviours, particularly against women and children.

A relevant question for sustainable blue economies that are not focused on domestic violence, but whose progress may nevertheless be affected by domestic violence, is: to what degree can gender programmes include messaging for potential sufferers or perpetrators, and signposting to relevant government and civil society services, in the course of their public communications and engagements?

Relevant services include:

- safe houses for domestic violence sufferers;
- dedicated domestic violence units in police forces;
- multiple routes to access services safely without increasing risk to sufferers (e.g., the use of dedicated phone lines, confidential disclosure in medical and other community institutions);
- structured behaviour change programmes for perpetrators;
- policy and legislation to outlaw coercive, controlling and violent behaviours; and
- public communication campaigns to shift norms and combat the “blind eye” towards domestic violence (Source: UN Women Caribbean, 2025).

The Caribbean Gender Portal tracks domestic violence legislation in Caribbean countries, providing up-to-date information about legal recourse: <https://caribbean.unwomen.org/en/caribbean-gender-portal>

A component of the portal, “GBV resources”, offers information under the following headings:

- What is the legal standard set for state actors and law makers in relation to gender-based violence?
 - Duty to comply with ratified international human rights conventions
 - Duty to comply with the Constitution as the supreme law
- What laws address gender-based violence?
- Help for survivors

<https://caribbean.unwomen.org/en/caribbean-gender-portal/caribbean-gbv-law-portal/gbv-country-resources>

Useful information about dedicated women’s support services across Caribbean SIDS, including domestic violence shelters and other confidential services, is available on the following portal, maintained by the University of the West Indies Institute for Gender & Development Studies:

<https://sta.uwi.edu/igds/mfc/regional-groups>

Children need a special focus

There are no recent Caribbean-specific regional assessments of violence against children. The last assessment of violence against children, targeted at the Caribbean SIDS, is very old (UNICEF, 2006). However, a more recent assessment by UNICEF covering Latin America and the Caribbean (UNICEF, 2022) reveals concerning levels of culturally sanctioned violent behaviour towards children in the form of direct bodily (corporal) punishment. UNICEF finds that nearly two thirds of children aged 1 to 14 in Latin America and the Caribbean experience violent discipline at home. Experience of violent discipline exceeds 80% in Haiti, Jamaica and Suriname (ibid).

Furthermore, children under 12 are particularly vulnerable to experiencing psychological trauma from high levels of violence in adolescents and adults around them. Adolescents (12–18 years), especially male adolescents in the wider Latin America and Caribbean region, are highly prone to involvement in interpersonal violence (UNICEF, 2022).

The regional strategies of both Save the Children and UNICEF focus on the particular vulnerabilities and lack of safeguards for migrant children, in light of the high prevalence of migration throughout the region. Recent studies by UNICEF with ODI Global have highlighted significant numbers of Haitian and Venezuelan children on the move throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. They are subject to mistreatment, abuse and even trafficking – as well as disruption to their studies, food security and development. Marcus et al. (2024) highlight the following documented instances of child trafficking and forced labour in the Caribbean (See Table 2).

Table 2: Internal trafficking of children and adults in Caribbean SIDS

| Country | Evidence of trafficking |
|---------------------|---|
| Dominican Republic | There is some evidence of an increase in the domestic trafficking of children in the Dominican Republic from the interior of the country to coastal tourist areas (USDOL 2021). Haitian men and boys and Dominican men and boys of Haitian descent are particularly at risk of trafficking into forced labour in agriculture in the Dominican Republic. |
| Eastern Caribbean | There is some evidence of trafficking within and between various Caribbean islands, e.g., Puerto Rico and the United States Virgin Islands; the Turks and Caicos Islands are a destination for men, women and children trafficked for sexual exploitation and forced labour; Bonaire, Saint Eustatius and Saba are both transit locations and destinations for trafficked people. |
| Guyana and Suriname | There are reports of young girls in mining communities being subjected to commercial sexual exploitation as a result of human trafficking, and trafficking of children for labour in mining. |
| Jamaica | Girls and rural, immigrant and LGBTQI+ children are at greatest risk of trafficking for sexual exploitation in the country's tourist resorts. |

Source: Marcus et al. (2024)

Caribbean regional policy priorities on gender and children's issues

National and regional policy commitments provide touch points for grounding GEDSI analyses, gender equality and the safeguarding of vulnerable women and children in programmes and projects.

Specifically, CARICOM members have approved an accord known as “Stepping It Up: A Strategy to Achieve Gender Equality in the Caribbean Community” (CARICOM, October 2023). It is intended to be a roadmap for member states to mainstream gender and provides a regional coordinated approach to achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls, in alignment with Sustainable Development Goal 5. Leaders of the Caribbean community pivoted especially to gender-responsive economic and societal recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic when data on the spike in domestic abuse surfaced. Since many women were forced to shelter in place with their abusers during the pandemic, the incidence of domestic violence increased by as much as 125% in parts of the Caribbean, highlighting the urgent need to reduce violence against women and strive for gender equality in other areas of life, health, education, participation and livelihood (CARICOM, 2023). There is increasing recognition that programmes on gender-based and intimate partner violence must adopt a “zero tolerance” approach.

All Caribbean countries have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which provides a legal foundation for target-setting and safeguarding in country and regional programme contexts. There is no regional commitment or mechanism for enforcing the CRC or developing specific activities; rather, strategies and action plans are proceeding at national level. The Organisation for Eastern Caribbean States provides a digital clearinghouse for national plans and initiatives (OECS, u.d.). The clearinghouse shows that national legislation to codify the rights of the child varies by country. Setting and enforcing robust organisational child safeguarding policies should be prioritised, taking a country-specific approach to working with law enforcement in the case of suspected breaches of child rights.

(see Good Programming box below).

Key sources of guidance for children's development and protection through the programme cycle

Guidance is available for supporting children to not only survive but thrive during their early years. The Caribbean Early Childhood Development Good Practice Guide is designed to assist policymakers, planners, officers and practitioners in the field to design and deliver good quality care and learning experiences for children in their countries. <https://www.caribank.org/publications-and-resources/resource-library/guides-and-toolkits/caribbean-early-childhood-development-good-practice-guide>

For avoidance of harm and safeguarding issues, guidance has been released tailored specifically to Caribbean countries, such as the UNICEF Eastern Caribbean Office Keeping Children Safe website and resources. <https://www.unicef.org/easterncaribbean/keeping-children-safe>

The laws to prevent violent disciplinary actions against children vary across the Caribbean, with only a handful of countries having legislated against corporal punishment. Therefore, the recourse to law enforcement for instances of child harm varies by country.

Child support services may be available and appropriate for blue economy programmes to signpost towards and publicise, if they are working in communities with children and this is relevant. Agencies such as UNICEF and the UN office for the Eastern Caribbean are beginning to work with governments to pilot psychological and practical support services for children affected by violence, whether they have experienced it themselves or are traumatised by witnessing it in their surroundings. These include, for example, a mental health chatline and the MyChild Helpline app (see <https://www.unicef.org/easterncaribbean/keeping-children-safe>).

There may be a role for nudging toward more child-protective social norms in adult and whole-community settings. Just as there are opportunities for blue economy programmes to embrace gender-equitable values and norms and champion these in the workplace and in public engagement, the same is true for the potential of blue economy programmes to champion responsible and child-protective behaviours where appropriate.

Youth unemployment: a persistent challenge

Younger generations are more likely to be unemployed

Youth unemployment is an ongoing concern in the Caribbean region because younger age groups are disproportionately un- or under-employed (CARICOM, 2015). There is increasing regional focus on policies and legislation that could facilitate the provision of decent jobs for young people. Policy proposals for enhanced regional economic integration include a 2023 decision to enable full freedom of movement for people in the CARICOM Common Single Market and Economy area.⁵ This is seen as a step that could improve young people's job prospects and professional development opportunities (CARICOM, 2023; and, building on the "Declaration of Paramaribo on the Future of Youth in the Caribbean Community", CARICOM, 2010). Note that even under the current provisions that permit movement for skilled workers among CARICOM member states, Haiti has not managed to implement the terms of the Single Market nor to participate fully. Vulnerabilities for migrant workers – especially Haitian migrants – are discussed below, as well as in Section 5.

Young women are particularly prominent among the under- and un-employed (CARICOM, 2015). This has partly to do with cultural expectations and skewed care burdens. There is higher female than male participation in and completion of secondary education and even tertiary education in some states, but a big gender gap for vocational training (with men far exceeding

⁵ Full freedom of movement is due to come into effect among four states initially – Barbados, Belize, St Vincent and the Grenadines, and Dominica – in October 2025. At the time of writing, it exists only for skilled workers who meet certain criteria, as described in Article 46 of CARICOM's regional integration blueprint, the Revised Treaty of Chaguaramas (2001).

in participation rates) and a gender pay gap. Some have called for a serious, open conversation about equitable “care economies” and have discussed some of the measures required to implement this idea (see UN Women Caribbean, u.d.).

A widespread view exists that current educational curricula, vocational and technical training are weak on climate and environment integration. There is a major opportunity for better mainstreaming and climate futureproofing to create decent work and make it fit for purpose in environmental and sustainability terms (Wilkinson et al., 2022; Key Informant Interviews).

People living with disability

The prevalence of disability is projected to increase and Caribbean workplaces must prepare

At present, it is estimated that one million people in the Caribbean are living with disability (UNESCO, u.d.). By 2050, between one fifth and one third of all Caribbeans are projected to be living with a disability. This is linked to the ageing profile of the population and the increasing prevalence of non-communicable diseases, including those related to obesity and alcohol and tobacco consumption (ECLAC u.d.).

Disability is very much a problem of both the present and future. Only 10% of people living with disability (PLWD) are currently employed. Programmes and workplaces are not being adequately designed to accommodate PLWD and this is a major blind spot for Caribbean businesses and development interventions (from key informant interviews). These deficits may be directly addressed in blue economy practices by modeling best practice disability inclusion through all stages of hiring, management, retention and external (public) and target population engagement. However, programmes can also address the drivers of discrimination in ways that aim to shift harmful norms and structural constraints (OECS, 2020).

The reasons for exclusion are largely cited as discriminatory biases. The most effective way to tackle such biases is through regular, frequent awareness raising campaigns, especially in schools, colleges and in the media. Caribbean-specific resources have been developed to help with this (see box, directly below).

Key disability-positive training resources

UNESCO and the University of the West Indies Centre for Disability Studies have developed a series of training courses aimed at youth, youth-led organisations and media practitioners to shift discriminatory social norms around disability. More information, including a training manual, training video and other resources, are available at: <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/advancing-rights-persons-disabilities-caribbean>

Migrants and displaced people

Migration within the Caribbean region is increasingly on the political agenda

There is a “migration corridor” from Haiti to the Dominican Republic, meaning a sustained flow of people that registers as being significant on a Latin American and Caribbean regional scale; there are other smaller migration phenomena within the Caribbean sub-region, too. “Push factors” motivating people to leave Haiti include low human development levels, compounding disasters, lack of post-disaster recovery and violence. Caribbean regional institutions such as OECS and CDEMA have recently facilitated discussions and political commitments by member states to improve the inter-operability and collective provision of social protection among Caribbean states, to address the needs of all migrants within the region, especially in disaster displacement contexts (OECS, 2021). The UN’s Caribbean office of the International Organization for Migration has been particularly active in investing in support services for voluntary migrants, involuntary displaced persons and victims of trafficking (Longhurst and Gouretskaia, 2021; IOM, u.d.). Despite high political awareness of these dynamics, in practice, migrant workers are more likely to work informally and without adequate recognition of their labour rights or access to social protection, making them particularly vulnerable to exploitation. Migrants are also more likely to fall victim to common deceptions that draw them inadvertently into human trafficking, as outlined in the following IOM observation:

“It is becoming clearer that the region’s trafficking dynamics mirror the world’s most common methods of recruitment, deception, transportation, coercion and exploitation. For example, some Caribbean women were offered ‘great’ jobs through text messaging and social networking websites and ended up trafficked for sexual exploitation in another Caribbean country.

“Some victims from South Asia and Eastern Europe were recruited with the promises of a better life and more money, only to arrive in the Caribbean and be forced to labour in houses, factories, small retail shops or dance clubs. Some males were recruited from East Asia and Central America and trafficked as fishermen. Also reflecting global dynamics, some victims have been trafficked within their own country.

“Many of the victims who have been identified and assisted by IOM and its Caribbean partners have children, are between 20 and 30 years of age, have a debt because of the trafficking experience, and had no way to return home.”

International Organization for Migration Caribbean (IOM, u.d.).

The following section investigates the socioeconomic vulnerabilities of informal workers in the blue economy, while Section 4 explores human trafficking in blue economy sectors and routes to redress and support its victims.

Informal workers

The high incidence of informal work impedes human development

A large portion of workers in Caribbean blue economies are in informal or casual labour, with some on “zero hours” contracts or no formal contracts across a wide range of jobs: small scale fishing, shipping, tourism and hospitality. In addition, according to key informant interviews, a significant proportion of informal workers are women.

It is important to highlight that informal workers experience the impacts in the blue economy more acutely than those in formal employment. This is because:

- They lack stable, guaranteed incomes. They are left without a means of livelihood if their assets (e.g., boat or other property and equipment) are destroyed in an extreme weather event.
- Informal workers are not covered by state-provided social safety nets such as healthcare or other benefits; for example, they are not on social security databases because they are not registering as contributors. This could also potentially include immigrants or guest workers, or anyone in low-paying casual/non-contract work. They are also unlikely to be able to afford private healthcare. State healthcare coverage exists in many Caribbean states but is very far from comprehensive and must often be topped up by private services.
- They are less likely to have their work equipment covered by insurance, and less likely to be registered formally in state systems that may permit eligibility for government compensation (if it exists). They are typically unbanked or underbanked and are unable to secure loans to rebuild after climate events.
- They lack occupational health and safety rigour and protections such as insurance policies.

Informal labour exists in a range of contexts and is far from limited to small businesses. It is rife in the hiring practices of larger businesses and multinationals, including large hotels and resorts who hire workers on a casual basis. There is a distinction between informal workers and own-account or self-employed workers. Own-account workers may run the spectrum, from well-established small businesses with contracts, where employees are guaranteed secure wages, sick and holiday pay and other employee benefits and insurance cover for business assets (formality), to precarious and casual arrangements without any job security (informality).

Informality characterises not only employer–employee relations, but is a feature of land and natural resource tenure and access arrangements in Caribbean SIDS. This has profound implications for livelihood security and potential. For example, the accessibility of beaches to local people is highly contested in many parts of the region, whether as a recreational asset or for economic purposes such as commerce and trade (e.g., for the sale of food and drink, handicrafts, beauty services, etc. by own-account vendors). Several key informant interviews flagged access to beaches as a source of low-level conflict between resort managers and self-employed/own-account workers, and a cause of lost earnings and disempowerment among workers. There are two distinct but related dimensions to this:

- **Public access to foreshore, waterfront and beach locations.** Hotels and resorts may own beachfront land and fail to provide public rights of way across their property to reach public beaches, even if they are obliged to provide access, by law.

- **The operation of small-scale commerce and trade on the foreshore, including beaches.**

Depending on the jurisdiction, commercial activity on the foreshore may be subject to licencing (as in Jamaica) but informal workers may be unable, by definition, to overcome the fees and bureaucratic requirements to obtain formal licences.

Situations such as these motivate behaviours such as informal vendors walking in shallow ocean waters, where they believe private land exclusions do not apply. According to interviewees, sometimes private property owners have legitimate legal rights to exclude “trespassers”. However, often they do not have rights to exclude people’s access to or presence on beach and foreshore land, and often the legal status is simply unclear or obfuscated by the passage of time (see box below). From a development programme perspective, workers’ lack of legal literacy and knowledge of their true rights to operate is a driver of marginalisation and vulnerability, which can be productively tackled through legal advice and training.

Box 2: Informal land use, informal economic activity, and the poor definition of tenure rights

Insecurity of land tenure and land access rights, including in coastal areas, is pervasive in Caribbean SIDS and has a heavy bearing on people’s economic security as a result. In the present-day Caribbean there are significant informalities in land tenure systems, characterised by:

- illegal occupation on state or private land, for shorter or longer periods of time;
- contested occupation or use of land where a private entity claims exclusive ownership and use rights, but community members assert historic rights (particularly common to beach access rights across Caribbean islands and discussed further under Tourism in Section 4); and
- legitimate interests in family land, which cannot be exercised because they are undocumented or insufficiently documented (Griffith-Charles, 2014; key informant interviews).

Family land tenure refers to a practice in states such as St Lucia, where the government has undertaken formal land titling to address legacy inequities from the colonial period, but may have granted title to a general family grouping, such as “heirs of Smith”. This has created new opportunities and challenges for individual heirs to trace, claim and benefit from land tenure rights over subsequent generations (Griffith-Charles, 2014).

Tenure insecurity or lack of clarity creates practical difficulties for community members in their daily lives. It also creates difficulties for government agencies and development programmes seeking to support low-income groups with the most precarious incomes and greatest vulnerability to natural hazards.

Where the ownership of land for settlement, cultivation or business premises is unclear, or contested, people cannot use land as collateral for loans to undertake maintenance and repair. Or, worse, tenure insecurity can make people less willing or able to fund disaster preparedness and recovery after disasters (Toppin-Allaheer, 2015).

Anecdotally, the most frequently mentioned climate and environment hazards with negative impacts on informal coastal workers at present are extreme weather events (e.g., tropical storms) and Sargassum influxes. Since 2011, unusually large quantities (thousands of tons) of Sargassum seaweed have been washed up onto the beaches of the Eastern Caribbean islands, causing harm to ecosystems, human health and blue economies, especially the fishing and tourism sectors. It is thought that a combination of excess nutrients in the water from agricultural runoff combined with climate change factors (warming waters) have combined to engender the vast growth. Both offshore and onshore, Sargassum influxes are harming economic activity and human wellbeing:

“Sargassum has filled coastal waters and beaches frequented by tourists and locals, resulting in reduced fisheries and tourism income, and additional spending on cleaning beaches with heavy machinery that causes ecological damage and beach erosion. There has been significant reduction in catches of some pelagic fishes and health impacts from exposure to hydrogen sulphide from decaying Sargassum”

(Cox et al., 2019: 1).

As well as harm to health from hydrogen sulphide gas among workers who earn money from clearing the heaps of rotting seaweed, and reduction in fish catches from fish die-off, the Sargassum also creates a nuisance and damages fishing vessels by fouling and tangling in outboard motors.

Many informal workers in Caribbean SIDS economies are in the tourism and fishing sectors, which rely heavily on the integrity of coastal-marine ecosystems for sustainability, under current and future climate conditions. In a context of informality, there are options for training and skills development to protect and empower workers in their current roles, and there are also pathways to formalising work, which would make it more secure and protected (see Good Programming, below). In the context of climate change, there are also options for transforming the environmental sustainability of resource-dependent sectors to make them and their workforce fit for the future (see Section 3).

Guide to good programming: informal workers

- **Offer literacy, numeracy and legal literacy support** to empower people on their rights to access natural assets for their environmentally and economically sustainable development, such as the right of access to beaches for sustainable entrepreneurial activity.
- **Carefully research the “true” legal status of beach and coastal ownership and access in each location.** Land tenure and titling systems are variable in Caribbean SIDS and arise from the different colonial regimes and post-colonial land titling and administration initiatives of sovereign governments. The histories, local sentiments, current beach access arrangements and legal positions vary from one island to the next, and require careful investigation. As noted, private landowners have often come under criticism for barring access to the foreshore where they should provide it. For this reason, it may be necessary to seek official national government advice or even independent legal advice in the case of contested claims. Note that ownership regimes may vary within a country as well as between Caribbean SIDS. For example, the majority of coastal land in St Lucia is owned by the Crown, but a portion around urban centres is privately owned.
- **Extend occupational health and safety to informal workers** of the blue economy. This implies formalisation of work in order to provide adequate health and safety protections. Where formalisation is not immediately feasible, governments and development partners may nonetheless invest in health and safety outreach campaigns and access to safety equipment for vulnerable workers.
- **Leverage in-country procurement processes and select suppliers** who can prove that they contract their workers fairly and provide rigorous occupational health and safety training, equipment and oversight. This applies especially to some of the common occupational risks in blue economy sub-sectors that are noted in this report. Suppliers should, further, be asked to provide evidence of GEDSI-responsive policies and practices.

Indigenous people

Indigenous communities, have distinct priorities, needs and knowledge.

The history of the Caribbean, in which slavery-based plantation economies were developed by colonising Europeans, wiped out many of the Indigenous inhabitants and replaced them with Afro- and Euro-descendants. However, some indigenous people remain in distinct communities in the region, especially in Dominica (the Kalinago people, semi-autonomously governed), Suriname, Guyana and Belize. These groups have their own distinct priorities and development needs.

Leadership by Indigenous people in the main state agencies has also benefitted the Caribbean SIDS concerned by introducing relevant climate resilience knowledge into policies and practices. For example, Sylvanie Burton, an Indigenous Kalinago government minister in Dominica, recalled:

“Following Hurricane Maria, the Housing Division of Dominica has integrated traditional architecture: such as A-frame roofs and also hip-roofs. These are A- or semi-A shaped and do not have nails but screws. My ancestors used wooden nails to fasten the rafters together, these were able to withstand the force of the wind. They can withstand hurricanes better. In this way, modern design and indigenous knowledge come together.”

Rt. Hon. Sylvanie Burton, Government of Dominica (CDKN, 2022).

This is a powerful example of how Indigenous and local knowledge may have been gradually lost through modernisation processes. However, if Indigenous people are granted leadership positions in development programmes and their traditional knowledge is respected and applied, their knowledge could contribute significantly to resilience in the face of climate and environmental hazards.

Guide to good programming: Indigenous and local communities

The voluntary guidelines for ecosystem-based adaptation and disaster risk reduction prepared by the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) Secretariat, as mandated by national governments, contain a core set of principles and safeguards for protecting nature and people from harm in the development of policies, programmes and projects.

In addition, they contain a range of operational tools and good practice case studies to guide planners and programme managers, and have widespread applicability to the blue economy sectors and coastal-marine ecosystems. They stress the importance of the Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) of Indigenous communities before development interventions are undertaken that may affect them: [sbstta-22-inf-01-en.pdf](#)

LGBTQI+ people

LGBTQI+ are expressly persecuted in some Caribbean states and poorly tolerated in others.

People who identify as lesbian, gay and bisexual or who choose to be in same-sex relationships, together with people who have changing, fluid and/or non-binary sexual identities, including transgender, queer and intersex people, have a precarious standing in most Caribbean SIDS. This ranges from suspicion, hostility and discrimination to outright legal bans on homosexual practices, carrying heavy criminal penalties. The legal standing of LGBTQI+ people can be fast changing, as in Trinidad and Tobago, where consensual same-sex acts between individuals were decriminalised in 2018 only to be recriminalised in a later High Court ruling (March 2025, Outright International, 2025). Homosexual acts are currently criminalised in Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, St Lucia, and St Vincent and the Grenadines. Some of these laws are under appeal and the situation may change again. See the box “Key sources of guidance”, below, for websites that carry up-to-date information.

In most Caribbean SIDS, transgender rights and non-binary gender assignment are not recognised. Such is the febrile political and social atmosphere around LGBTQI+ rights and the relative swiftness with which laws can change, that any programme or organisation operating in a specific country or territory would need to keep careful track of developments to ensure their staff, participants and other stakeholders are protected.

Guide to good programming: LGBTQI+ people

It is imperative that blue economy programme managers know the legal status of homosexuality in the territories in which they are working, given that homosexuality is illegal in some Caribbean countries. There could be repercussions for staff and contractors who move there or visit from more progressive jurisdictions if they are unaware of specific laws and attitudes.

Be guided by local organisations that uphold the dignity, rights and safety of LGBTQI+ people (or, sub-regional specialists, if that is all that is available) to guide how LGBTQI+ people may be appropriately included, supported and protected. This is to ensure that blue economy programmes neither perpetuate harmful stereotypes nor inadvertently cause a harmful backlash.

Key sources of guidance on LGBTQI+ issues

Eastern Caribbean Alliance for Diversity and Equality (ECADE) is an umbrella LGBTQI+ civil society organisation headquartered in St Lucia. It has a news feed with the latest bulletins on legislation concerning the LGBTQI+ community in the region and current risks and protections.

<https://eequality.wordpress.com/>

A regularly-updated list of national laws against same-sex intimacy is published on

<https://76crimes.com/76-countries-where-homosexuality-is-illegal/> The same website, <https://76crimes.com> carries important information about the status of legal protection against discrimination and harassment for LGBTQI+ people, generally.

The Asher-Lyric Website undertakes ongoing analysis on which countries are safe and friendly for LGBTQI+ travellers, based on an index, covering same-sex marriage laws, protection against discrimination, propaganda/morality laws and other criteria. This has the potential to be a valuable resource for expatriate/foreign staff and contractors involved in development programmes in the Caribbean, who may be unfamiliar with local and national laws, customs, attitudes and behaviours.

<https://www.asherfergusson.com/lgbtq-travel-safety/>

Country-specific information is provided by Outright International:

<https://outrightinternational.org/our-work/country-overviews>

FCDO provides travel advice for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender travellers in general and by country: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/lesbian-gay-bisexual-and-transgender-foreign-travel-advice>

General health, safety and personal security advice for LGBTQI+ travelers is given at

<https://patient.info/news-and-features/lgbtq-travel-how-to-stay-safe>



Grenada, Photo by Hugh Whyte on Unsplash

3

The exposure and vulnerability of workers in natural resource-dependent sectors

All blue economy sectors face some environmental and climate risks but some sub-sectors and the workers in them are more acutely exposed and vulnerable than others. The key research question addressed in this section is:

- How are the disadvantaged social groups most dependent on marine and coastal ecosystem goods and services at risk from environmental degradation?

The section looks first at recent trends in environmental degradation and then highlights key future projections that are likely to further affect these vulnerable groups. The focus is primarily on workers in blue economy sectors, but in many cases, the discussion has implications for coastal-dwelling communities more broadly.

Two blue economy sectors that stand out for their high environmental risk are tourism, and fishing and mariculture (seaweed farming). Tourism is important as a source of foreign revenue and as a source of jobs, both directly in hospitality and through supply chains and contracted work, including maintenance, food and energy supply. Fishing contributes relatively small amounts to GDP, but is a vital source of income (sometimes in full but often in part) and nutrition to many Caribbean households, and is a vital part of the cultural identity of many Caribbean communities.

As we look at each of the key groups at risk, in turn, it is important to remember the “cascading” nature of climate, environmental and social impacts. For instance, research into the impacts of Hurricane Maria (2017) revealed that the hurricane’s devastating damage was not limited to a single hit but took place over time, with cascading effects on social, economic and ecological systems, including human health, education, safety, cultural identity, and other aspects of multidimensional wellbeing (Shelton et al., 2024). This is why it is so important to make targeted disaster preparedness and climate change adaptation efforts that speak to the needs of especially vulnerable groups: it does not just avert and minimise one shock, but potentially averts and minimises many forms of damage. A detailed technical overview of adaptive capacity and socioeconomic vulnerability in the Caribbean fisheries sector is provided in the CEFAS publication, *Responding to climate change in Caribbean fisheries and aquaculture through adaptation* by Townhill et al. (2021).

Fisheries and related value chains

Fishing is a vital source of livelihood and also of food security and nutrition in the Caribbean. Small-scale fisheries and large-scale industrial fishing alike are already affected by and will face further changes in commercial fish species abundance. Fish are “on the move” as sea surface temperatures increase due to climate change. In addition, there are also major changes to spawning grounds or fish nurseries, which will affect the abundance of various species. These include the degradation of critical mangrove habitats and the coastal “squeeze” phenomenon which reduces the intertidal area in which new mangroves can regenerate or be propagated (Government of Guyana, 2024).

Measuring who works in fishing in the Caribbean is a challenging task owing to the high levels of informality in the sector and the discrepancies between data sources (FAO, et al., 2023). In Antigua and Barbuda, for example, fisheries contributed approximately 2% of GDP in 2019/20 (Commonwealth, u.d.). Yet one source lists the number of fishers at 2,149, while another (Horsford, 2021) puts the number at less than half, at 937. This is a wide disparity – and not unexpected, given the informality and invisibility of much of this activity.

In some sub-sectors, over-fishing/harvesting is pressuring resources and leading to changes in the number of sustainable jobs available. For instance, Queen Conch gathering employs over 9,000 Bahamians, including women (The Nature Conservancy, u.d.). However, conch fishing has been facing an alarming decline, prompting national alarm.

The broader value chains and economic activities associated with fishing can involve significantly more individuals than the fish catch itself. This is illustrated in Dominica, where 912 individuals work in the marine fisheries sector, and five in aquaculture (CRFM, 2020). However, a combined 2,800 people benefit from the industry in total, including fisheries, processing, and support services (Dom767 (u.d.)).

In Guyana, fisheries contributed 2% to GDP in 2017 (WWF, 2024), employing 8,230 individuals directly (8,175 of whom worked in marine fisheries, and 55 in aquaculture) (CRFM, 2020). However a further 5,000 individuals were employed in the country’s seafood manufacturing sector in fish processing, packaging, etc. (LCDS, 2021). It is worth noting that the relative age of these statistics, dating to before the Covid-19 pandemic, is fairly typical of the region, and it is difficult to find more recent statistics.

According to one report, in Trinidad and Tobago, “6,500 people are employed in the marine fishing sector, 4,000 of whom are fishers, about 19% are involved in the processing industry, another 19% in fish marketing and distribution, and the remaining 1% in vessel and gear construction and maintenance” (Kishore, 2021).

Non-governmental and civil society organisations working in the sector find that most fishers are older workers, and that the number of women fishers is unknown and probably underreported, as they tend to be family members who do not register separately with the government. As older workers, they are more likely to have or be prone to some disabilities (key informant interviews). There are several different types of fishing in which men are predominantly involved: pot fishing, free lung dive fishing and compression diving, all of which carry significantly different risks and have different fisher age profiles (Marschke et al., 2020; see also see the discussion of dangerous compression diving practices in Section 5).

The intersection of exposure to climate hazards, including climate extremes, and the informal work status of many fishers create economic vulnerabilities, and mean that workers in the sector can face quite high risks from climate and environmental change. As outdoor workers, fishers are exposed to higher air temperatures, including heatwaves. They are at direct risk of exposure to damaging hurricanes, which could cause injury or loss of life as well as loss of equipment.

Climate hazards, including extreme weather events, and environmental degradation may also reduce local people's ability to access locally cultivated and harvested food and increase their dependence on imported food. This may offer a less nutritious diet (especially if the more nutritious imported items are expensive). These trends, in turn, could increase rates of malnutrition and non-communicable disease (Shelton et al., 2024; Mycoo et al., 2022, 2065).

Invasive and alien species and a history of over-fishing have also played their part in creating pressure on fisheries in the past few decades. A 2017 assessment by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) of 1,360 marine bony shorefish species, including most near-shore species, conducted across 38 Caribbean countries and territories, found that 5% of marine bony shorefish species are threatened by "overfishing, invasive lionfish predation and the degradation of coral reefs and estuaries" (IUCN, 2017).

The spread of the highly invasive and non-native lionfish has long been a problem in the region. The lionfish was released into the wild in Florida in the mid-1980s and has since experienced an explosive population growth throughout the Caribbean where "it has been documented to prey on large numbers of juvenile native Caribbean fishes and crustaceans and is expected to have serious detrimental effects on native coral reef fish populations" (Debrot, 2023: 2). The impacts of the lionfish's spread until now have been highly damaging to local people's health, economic productivity and recreational enjoyment of coastal-marine environments, but various initiatives are also underway to capture them for human food. Lionfish consumption is possible if care is taken to avoid or manage human envenomation and consumption from known Ciguatoxin areas (Hardison, 2023; Norton, 2021). New initiatives to use lionfish for good mirror efforts to convert unwanted Sargassum influxes into economic assets, such as biofuel. Both types of initiative reflect how Caribbean innovators are turning environmental problems into the basis for sustainable development.

Effective responses to strengthen the security and productivity of fishers' livelihoods and their role in promoting sustainable fisheries include maintaining networks of fisherfolk in the region, such as those that have been fostered in the Eastern Caribbean island states. These networks harness the power of collective action to build local capabilities, innovation and knowledge, and create a unified voice calling for policy responses to protect the sector (CERMES, 2019). There have also been concerted efforts in the region to implement the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines of the FAO, 2018; CERMES, 2019). However, organised fishers' groups and their allies consider that progress in implementing the guidelines could be much accelerated and that local institutions governing sustainable fishing, such as People's Tribunals, could be deployed to achieve the implementation of the Voluntary Guidelines more effectively (Gerhardinger et al., 2023).

Although the current study focuses on present-day management and operational choices for identifying and supporting at-risk workers in the sector, many scientific studies are underway to measure and model climate suitability and other environmental threats for a range of marine species, including fish and seaweed (both wild and cultivated) in the Caribbean in the future.

It is critical to develop an understanding of likely medium- to long-term changes in coastal-marine ecosystems.

It is also important to understand the potential for today's technical management decisions, workforce training, and capacity-strengthening interventions to prepare Caribbean SIDS for future pathways to sustainable and resilient development. Many of these emergent concerns are being highlighted as political and investment priorities by Caribbean SIDS governments (see Box 4).

Box 3: Where are the women fishers and fish processors?

Women are present in the fisheries and value chains in the Caribbean but are often not registered with the government as such, and so are not counted in official statistics. Their invisibility and the informal nature of their work also means that they fail to make contributory national insurance payments and so do not qualify for disability and unemployment benefits, pensions and other social safety nets (Gerhardinger et al., 2023; also see the discussion on informal workers, above).

In **Antigua and Barbuda**, research (Hackshaw 2015) indicates that only 7% of 937 active fishers are women. However, “[i]t is possible that the number is higher but goes unregistered because of gender roles assigned in society. Spouses or girlfriends investing in fishing operations often leave the registration to their male counterparts”. This is highly likely to be the case in other countries as well. In the same country, in 2019, only 15% of fishers were under the age of 35, indicating that 85% of fishers were 35 and older (Hackshaw, 2015).

In **St Vincent and the Grenadines (SVG)**, “[t]he fishing industry ... is male dominated, with little attention paid to the work of women in fisheries. However, women play a valuable role in the industry, especially in the postharvest sector through the value-added processing and marketing of fish and other marine animals for consumers”. Officially, only 3.5% of fishers in SVG are women (Romeo and McConney). A sub-sector of fisheries in SVG, the farming of Tri-Tri fish, is dominated by women, who comprise 62% of fishers (UNDP, u.d.3).

Belize has a strong fishing industry, and a vibrant aquaculture sector. The former employs 2,200 people, and the latter employs 1,806 people. Aquaculture contributed 3% to GDP in 2015, while data indicate that wild capture accounted for just under 2% in 2022. Marine fisheries are growing in importance to the economy, from 28 million Belizean dollars in 2015 to 52 million in 2022 (IADB, 2024). Mariculture, the farming of seaweed, is also growing in importance, with several small-scale operations. There are 2,500 fishers in Belize, and an additional 15,000 individuals benefit indirectly from the sector, based on 2019 figures (The Nature Conservancy, 2024). Women are active in Belize's fisheries sector. In 2024, a new National Women in Fisheries association was formed, starting with a membership of 70 women (WCS Belize, 2024). Within the sector, women are involved in pre-harvest, harvest, post-harvest, and informal day-to-day fishing activities.

According to the UN (2021) only 4% of women work in the marine fisheries sector in **St Lucia**, and 20% in aquaculture. Women work mainly in fish processing and are not captured in government records. Similarly, in **Barbados**, “men predominantly engage in fishing, while women are primarily involved in processing and vending” (IFRC, 2024). A breakdown is not provided in terms of how many women vendors there are in the country. What is important, however, is that women are critical to the seafood value chain as vendors and processors and are equally affected by issues affecting the fisheries sector.

Box 4: Climate change adaptation priorities for Caribbean SIDS

An analysis of Caribbean SIDS' climate plans and UNFCCC reports⁶ (Dupar, 2025) reveals the following priority concerns about climate risks to key economic sectors and the provision of development services to the population. All Caribbean SIDS (16 out of 16 governments) are concerned about:

- freshwater security in a changing climate. All are taking action to maintain freshwater supplies, mostly through improved water management efficiencies and storage;
- climate threats to both agricultural productivity and food security. (Note that domestic fisheries, agriculture and food imports all contribute to food security.)
- the impacts of climate change on livelihoods and people's poverty and wellbeing, especially in fisheries, agriculture and tourism, owing to the climate vulnerability of these sectors;
- climate risks to public health. Emergent focal areas for surveillance and action include heat-related health risks and the expected higher incidence of dengue fever and other vector-borne diseases;
- the effects of climate change on infrastructure, including but not limited to human settlements, transport infrastructure such as ports, roads, bridges and airfields, and energy and water infrastructure;
- the effects of climate change on ecosystems, recognising the irreplaceable role of healthy, high integrity ecosystems in mitigating climate change and in adaptation. Strong ecosystems are also recognised and valued for their contributions to biodiversity, the quality and regulation of freshwater flows, heat modulation in local environments, and their aesthetic, recreational, cultural and spiritual value. Some of these ecosystem goods and services are directly monetised and others are not.

Around one third of Caribbean SIDS express concern about climate risks to their countries' unique cultural heritage assets, and one fifth of Caribbean SIDS describe taking actions to safeguard their cultural heritage.

A sub-set of Caribbean SIDS are making progress in developing "just transition" plans for training up the workforce, especially young people, in green low-carbon and climate resilience skills for the future. Barbados provides a strong example of this. Some Caribbean governments, such as the Dominican Republic, have produced a specific climate and gender action plan; or, like Trinidad and Tobago, are actively working towards one.

Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Cuba, Dominica, the Dominican Republic, Grenada, Haiti, Jamaica, St Kitts, St Lucia, St Vincent and the Grenadines, Suriname and Trinidad and Tobago all highlight progress in gender equality as fundamental to the achievement of their national climate goals. In some cases, governments are considering how women may be empowered through new technologies, including digital technologies, to increase their climate resilience (e.g. Dominican Republic).

⁶ Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Cuba, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Grenada, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica, St Kitts and Nevis, St Lucia, St Vincent and Grenadines, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago. The methodology was based on a thorough review of all 16 countries' Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), National Adaptation Plans (NAPs), Adaptation Communications and Biennial Transparency Reports (BTRs), as extracted from the latest published Registry entries for each country on unfccc.int, as of 31 March 2025. Each document was coded for different key sectoral and thematic areas of concern and stated action, in correspondence with the thematic and dimensional targets of the UAE Framework for Global Climate Resilience (UNFCCC CMA.5, 2023).

Tourism

Caribbean tourism promises its customers a safe, sunny, comfortable experience, with a range of offers from the indulgent beach holiday to the high-octane adventure sport experience. Beautiful beaches and warm, clear blue tropical waters are central selling points.

Integral to the proposition is the integrity of a well-oiled tourism infrastructure machine, including multi-modal transport and accommodation, such as cruise liners, hotels, airports, ports, roads, taxis, tour guides and operators, restaurants, souvenir sellers, bars and nightlife workers, along with suppliers linked to the hospitality industry, such as food and energy providers, artisan craftspeople, beauty therapists, and many others.

The reliance of Caribbean economies on tourism is critical in the context of blue economy development because the sector is so highly exposed and vulnerable to the negative impacts of climate change. Climate-related damages are already visible and are projected to rise over the course of the century (CTO, 2020; World Bank, 2021).

The following points indicate the number of workers and the magnitude of the businesses involved in direct tourism and the tourism value chain:

- Tourism contributes 60% of GDP in The Bahamas, and employs just over 50% of the population.
- Tourism employs 175,000 Jamaicans directly and another 354,000 indirectly. The sector “drives 15% of construction, 10% of banking and services, 20% of manufacturing, and 21% of utilities, agriculture and fisheries” (Waller, 2022). Like many other small island developing states, the sector is critical to the island’s economy. Tourism traditionally contributes over 30% of Jamaica’s GDP. The sector earned an estimated USD 4.38 billion in 2023/24 (Jamaica Gleaner, 2024). More than 60% of Jamaica’s tourism workforce are women (Government of Jamaica, 2023). However, this figure relates to tourism and its sub-sectors as a whole, including restaurants, hotels and entertainment. Figures and gender disaggregated breakdowns in areas such as yacht repairs and maintenance and water sports such as scuba diving, etc., are not provided.
- Tourism in Barbados contributes 17.5% of GDP (UNDP, u.d. 4). Its informal sector, which makes up 30–40% of GDP, is largely supported by tourism.
- Tourism is critical to Belize’s economy, despite its being a mainland country, contributing over 40% of the country’s GDP. One report finds that 11% of tour guides in Belize are women (National Women’s Commission, 2025). However, there are no statistics on the percentage of women making up the tourism sector as a whole.
- In total, 63,400 individuals were directly employed in St Lucia’s tourism sector in 2019. Tourism contributes 65% of the country’s GDP. The majority of those who work in this sector are women (ILO, 2018).
- In 2020, tourism accounted for 65% of the GDP of St Vincent and the Grenadines, employing 14,200 individuals.

For other SIDS, tourism is a lesser feature of the economy:

- In Dominica, the sector contributed 12.2% to GDP in 2019, and accounted for 10.5% of total direct employment (Mu, 2023). The UNDP puts this figure at 12,600 jobs in 2019.
- In Guyana, tourism contributed 2.1% of GDP in 2021; in 2024, the sector employed 39,000 individuals (Sodergren, 2024).

Coast-focused tourism, which dominates in the region, is already strongly impacted by intense tropical cyclones (Mycoo et al., 2022). Among 29 Caribbean islands, 22 were affected by at least one Category 4 or 5 tropical storm in 2017, with Hurricane Maria (2017) destroying nearly all of Dominica's infrastructure and inflicting losses of over 225% of annual GDP (ibid). The outlook is sobering. One recent study (Spencer, 2022) estimates that at a low-mid emissions trajectory and level of global warming, 53% of Caribbean beaches will be lost to sea-level rise and coastal erosion.

Climate change is also thought to amplify existing drivers of environmental degradation in the region. The Sargassum influxes on Caribbean beaches discussed earlier threaten tourist visits and create occupational hazards for workers (see "informal workers" above). They are thought to be partly a function of land-based nutrient run-off compounded by increasing surface sea water temperatures (CERMES, u.d.)

Caribbean governments are already alarmed by the potential harms of climate change to coral reefs, not only because of their inherent beauty and intrinsic biodiversity value, but also because of their related value to tourism and fishing. Coral reef ecosystems are at very high risk of damage, even now as the world becomes dangerously near to 1.5 degrees of average surface warming (IPCC, 2014; Mycoo, 2022). Ocean warming, acidification and deoxygenation arising from climate change, combined with land-based nutrient run-off, other solid waste and liquid pollution, and direct damage to reefs from overfishing and equipment, are causing great damage to coral reefs. Since the early 2000s, the GEF and UNDP have funded a number of successive sustainable blue economy projects in the Caribbean basin to address pressures on coral reefs and marine ecosystems, with a view to reversing degradation caused by both direct and indirect human pressures.

Workers' relative vulnerability to extreme events such as hurricanes depends largely on the formality (or conversely, informality) of their work and the social safety nets they have in place. Social protection such as paid leave to cover sickness or disability may be provided by private employers and is also covered by governments of the region, but only to workers registered with formal employers who make national insurance contributions. This precludes casual day labourers and some own-account workers. Such social safety nets are also more likely to exclude women, who are more often in part-time waged work and otherwise engaged as part-time carers.

A good practice case study discussed in Section 5 shows how integrated approaches to address the drivers of ecosystem degradation have enhanced tourism assets and a wide range of livelihood and other social benefits for coastal residents in Cuba. The "Mi Costa" initiative is particularly notable for its transformative interventions to advance gender equality.

| Guide to good programming: resource-dependent sectors, present and future | | | |
|--|--|--|---|
| Temporal thinking | | Partnership thinking | |
| <p>Actions to take now for near- to medium-term benefit of marginalised groups in context of current impacts of climate and environmental degradation and aggravating social factors</p> | <p>Action to take now to generate medium- to long-term options for marginalised groups</p> | <p>Actions requiring transboundary and interjurisdictional cooperation</p> | <p>Actions requiring partnerships among govt, non-govt (civil society, business) actors</p> |
| Questions to ask in programming context | | | |
| <p>Am I empowering marginalised groups/ improving people's wellbeing now?</p> | <p>Am I helping build the adaptive capacity of people and systems to future climate change and avoiding lock-in to pathways that could become maladaptive?</p> | <p>Am I mobilising transboundary / international partnerships and cooperation to address climate, environment and development issues of an interjurisdictional nature?</p> | <p>Am I making best use of indigenous, local knowledge and the specific needs of diverse groups to strengthen project design, improve prospects for sustainable project outcomes and avoid maladaptation?</p> |

Source: Authors



Barbados, Photo by Tom Jur on Unsplash

4

Safeguarding at-risk groups in blue economy sectors

This section highlights potential and actual harms against the person in the blue economy working environment – human trafficking (including forced labour), and sexual exploitation, abuse, and harassment, for which programme managers must be particularly vigilant. While these issues are by no means the preserve of blue economy sub-sectors and coastal-marine environments, the often isolating nature of offshore working environments and/or islands and coastal locations with poor transport infrastructure creates conditions under which workers are especially vulnerable to labour abuses. They also make it more difficult for such workers to escape or seek redress.

This section addresses the following research questions:

- What key issues in terms of sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (SEAH) and labour abuse risks in the Caribbean are flagged through GEDSI analysis?
- Who are the key stakeholders to engage on SEAH and labour abuse, and why?
- What data is available in this SIDS region that may be used for understanding SEAH and labour abuse?

Sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment (SEAH)

SEAH is defined by the Common Approach to Protection from Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Harassment (CAPSEAH) as three unacceptable abuses that are “rooted in power imbalances and often linked to inequality, notably gender inequality. Survivors of SEAH usually have less power or are more marginalised than the perpetrators for various reasons. Women and girls are most often affected” (CAPSEAH, u.d.). The individual abuses in SEAH are:

- **Sexual exploitation:** Any actual or attempted abuse of a position of vulnerability, differential power or trust for sexual purposes, including, but not limited to, profiting monetarily, socially or politically from the sexual exploitation of another. For example, coercing individuals into engaging in sexual activities in exchange for aid, services, employment opportunities, or other benefits.

- **Sexual abuse:** The actual or threatened physical intrusion of a sexual nature, whether by force or under unequal or coercive conditions. This includes sexual assault, rape, molestation, and other forms of non-consensual sexual activity.
- **Sexual harassment:** A range of unacceptable and unwelcome behaviours and practices of a sexual nature that may include, but are not limited to, sexual suggestions or demands, requests for sexual favours, sexual, verbal or physical conduct, or gestures that are or might reasonably be perceived as offensive or humiliating. This includes jokes, comments or messages of a sexual nature, suggestive looks, staring or leering, and display of or circulation of pornographic material. It is sometimes used to describe behaviour in a work environment but can also occur in communities and public spaces (CAPSEAH, u.d.).

There is a lack of good data to permit quantification of how widespread these risks are and to weight them respectively. By their nature, many of these issues are hidden and the data and reporting is piecemeal. Instead, this section flags key risks for programme leaders and managers to look out for. The following sub-sections provide signposts to published guidance, including self-assessment tools and guidelines that may be readily applied to different sectors, including the blue economy and offshore sectors businesses and programmes.

Labour abuses

Labour abuses exist in informal work and in pockets of the tourism industry. In general, workers operating under casual arrangements without written contracts – whether employed informally for day wages, employed by family members or self-employed in the informal economy – lack access to organisational systems and structures that give them proper access to health and safety risk assessments and protections. They also lack avenues that would enable them to complain, escalate and seek redress for sexual abuse, exploitation and harassment or other forms of labour abuse. Such is the case for divers employed by casual arrangements by small boat captains at immense personal risk to their lives and health, and employed by compression dive boat captains (see the sub-section on compression fishing).

Vulnerability to labour abuses and risks to health are not limited to the informal sector, but also apply to large-scale hospitality businesses, including in tourist resort settings. However, such abuses and risks remain largely in the shadows and are unearthed only by persistent investigative research. The evidence is anecdotal and does not give a full picture of the situation.

One such study is a PhD by Stephenson (2024), who visited a luxury Bahamian resort multiple times over a five-year period and collected and analysed 70 oral histories from staff and contractors. She found widespread but largely hidden exploitation of the workers, “expos[ing] how wage laborers are exploited into doing work beyond their wages through coercive tactics, wage theft and affective labor in order to fashion a notion of paradise rooted in Black subserviency” and how a “pipeline” of hospitality workers feeds Black Bahamian secondary school leavers into tourism jobs but without secure and meaningful prospects for professional advancement (Stephenson, 2024: 1).

Stephenson’s exposé included findings of a complete absence of protective equipment for workers dealing with chemicals or human waste, such as in cesspits on cay islands, and withholding of adequate medical care for workers, including in cases of severe allergic reactions.

Stephenson found that there was a hierarchy of working conditions among staff on the cay, with undocumented Haitian migrants at the very bottom of the ranking order.

In respect of the dangerous labour abuses and lack of freedoms uncovered by Stephenson, various legal levers can be employed to stop abuses and prosecute perpetrators. All Caribbean states are signatories to the Palermo Protocol against Human Trafficking, whose definition covers the illegal practices detailed here.

Human trafficking

An overarching concept relevant to the worst extremes of labour abuse in the region is human trafficking, which has the following official definition by the United Nations: “Human trafficking is the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of people through force, fraud or deception, with the aim of exploiting them for profit. Men, women and children of all ages and from all backgrounds can become victims of this crime, which occurs in every region of the world. The traffickers often use violence or fraudulent employment agencies and fake promises of education and job opportunities to trick and coerce their victims” (UN Inter-Agency Coordination Group on Trafficking in Persons).

It is strongly recommended not to use the term “modern slavery” in the Caribbean region, although its term is widespread in the United Kingdom, including in UK legislation.

Authors.

The recommendation to avoid the term “modern slavery” in this region should be read in the context of colonial abuses of power and the lack of a UK apology for historic slavery and lack of state restitution. This is explained by Caribbean legal scholar Jason Haynes (2023: 150): “In only expressing ‘regret’, but never formally apologising for their role in the commission of chattel slavery and in simultaneously championing the cause against ‘modern slavery’, colonial nations have once again demonstrated their contempt for the plight of Caribbean peoples to obtain justice for the mass atrocities committed over the course of 200 years. Indeed, by focusing on the ‘modern’ and not the ‘historical’, colonial nations have created a version of events that conveniently ignores the past and the peoples affected by past exploitation, while celebrating their (the colonials’) heroics in confronting present exploitation, conveniently described as the scourge of the twenty-first century.”

That said, independent Caribbean nation states have themselves ratified and codified into domestic law the provisions of UN anti-trafficking law, so demonstrating their political commitment to eradicating the practice.

“The enactment of anti-trafficking law was necessary to give domestic effect to the provisions of the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (hereafter, the Palermo Protocol), since the majority of Caribbean territories and islands, like the United Kingdom, are dualist jurisdictions under international law, which effectively means that international anti-trafficking law is not binding, in a de jure sense, in their domestic jurisdictions unless specifically incorporated into domestic law.”

(Haynes, 2023: 146).

Specific safeguarding risks for offshore workers

Employees in yachting, cruise ships and general shipping

As discussed earlier, the yachting sector is a significant employer in the Caribbean region. Employees are acutely vulnerable to labour abuses, given their isolation. ISWAN is an international body that logs labour abuses of all kinds that affect yacht workers (albeit worldwide, not confined to the Caribbean). They address:

- mental health issues
- contractual disputes
- physical abuse, harassment and bullying.

In the 2023–2024 financial year, ISWAN assisted a total of 6,932 seafarers and family members of 103 nationalities worldwide, including through relief mini-grants. They found that women were three times more likely than men to raise a complaint of abuse, harassment and bullying. In response to this theme, and especially through the “Yacht Aware” programme for yacht workers (which responds to women staffers who fall prey to unscrupulous captains and other onboard workers), ISWAN launched a campaign, “Safe at sea ... it takes all of us!” It aims to raise awareness of the personal safety challenges women face in the maritime sector, with a focus on the importance of allyship and the role that men seafarers can play in making life at sea safer for all, physically and psychologically.

Cruise ships are ubiquitous in the Caribbean. There are extensive investigative journalism pieces (e.g., Bonmati, 2015), and a range of non-governmental and legal support for employees of cruise ships, who tend to be not only foreign to the Caribbean region but also foreign to the countries running and managing the ships. Operators typically choose flags of convenience such as Panama, Liberia, The Bahamas and Barbados (Cruise Law News, u.d.; Law Shun, u.d.). Many employees come from Asian nations such as India, the Philippines and Indonesia, to work across cruise ship jobs ranging from cooking and cleaning to entertainment and engineering and maintenance. By using flags of convenience, cruise ship companies do not have to abide by higher-standard labour laws in their home countries or such countries as the United States, where corporate headquarters are based (Cruise Law News, u.d.).

Two other major categories of blue economy workers are susceptible to labour abuses and breaches of safeguarding legislation: workers in shipping (generally) and offshore workers in extractive industries such as oil and gas drilling and deep sea mining. Unfortunately, little data is available on their working conditions, and regulation is lax.

A critical initiative of the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the International Maritime Organization (IMO) is helping to illuminate maritime work, including offshore work, by driving more research and knowledge sharing. This is generating better information on the profile and conditions for workers, including disaggregated data collection by sex, age and nationality. Initial results have highlighted the need to accelerate decent working conditions for seafarers and fishers in the context of the high levels of informality and poor pay and rights (ILO, u.d./b). Although little data has been published that is specific to Caribbean SIDS, a global overview reveals that the proportion of young workers is higher in the maritime industries than in the workforce at large, and that women's official participation is a very small proportion of the whole, although variable by job sub-type. The "Beneath the Surface" initiative also flags the potential for using climate-resilient approaches and digitalisation to improve outcomes for offshore and maritime workers.

Illegal, unreported or unregulated (IUU) fishing

Illegal, unreported, unregulated (IUU) fishing is present in the Exclusive Economic Zones of Caribbean countries, and by definition fishers involved are working largely "invisibly", beyond the reach of official monitoring systems. From a social perspective, IUU fishing has been highly correlated with labour abuses, worldwide. As fish catches decline, operators are pressed to maintain their profit margins and they do this in part by squeezing costs, which includes denying wages and other basic rights to employees. Employees find themselves literally captive on boats and without leverage to address abuses.

The Caribbean Regional Fisheries Mechanism (CRFM) has taken action against IUU fishing and transnational organised crime, which should imply a reduction in exploitative and abusive labour conditions in the sector over time. Caribbean Regional Fisheries Mechanism (CRFM) Ministerial Council Resolution No. MC 15 (6) of 2021 expressed the support of Caribbean governments for the International Declaration on Transnational Organized Crime in the Global Fishing Industry. Also known as the Copenhagen Declaration, this international instrument was originally adopted on 15 October 2018 in Copenhagen, Denmark (Council of Europe, 2018), and the Blue Justice Initiative was established in 2019 to support countries with implementing the declaration (Blue Justice, u.d.). Twelve CRFM countries signed the Declaration in 2021, and two others signed in 2023. Several of these signatories are now active members of the Blue Justice coalition.

Compression fishing

Less a function of labour abuse than of personal choice and risk appetite, compression fishing is exceedingly dangerous and hard work, attracting younger men for potentially high financial rewards but leaving many of them injured with long-term disabilities (e.g. brain damage, physical incapacitation) or dead. A study by Marschke et al. (2020) of compression fishing in Jamaica found that it did not involve forced labour but operated through casual arrangements that are open to abuse. The men's oxygen supply is provided by a tube connected to a

compressor on the boat, while they dive 80 or 90 feet/30 metres down. Any crimping of the hose cuts off oxygen, risking compression sickness or death.

The authors of this study stated: “Across all our interviews, there is an absence of work contracts, gross income always favours a boat owner or captain, men do not get the best price for their fish, and general working conditions have real health and safety challenges such as sleeping all night on an open boat and a lack of safety equipment. All men face the elements, the risk of hurricanes that can destroy boats, gear and, in some cases, lives. Pots were lost in hurricanes or seriously damaged. Cargo ships cross the Pedro Bank, and in the absence of shipping lanes everyone has to be vigilant if such ships come near smaller boats. However, the most persistent challenge mentioned was for the young men involved in compressor dive fishing – this fishery was leaving men injured or dead. Compressor diving is not safe – this is far different than diving with a tank.”

The practice is so dangerous that there may not be a way for it to be conducted safely. Rather, regulatory approaches may be required to address it and channel fishers into safer practices altogether.

Guide to good programming: safeguarding for at-risk workers

Safeguarding against sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment

CAPSEAH: The Common Approach to Protection from Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Harassment is a UK-funded safeguarding hub that has developed extensive practical support materials and guidance for programme directors and managers. It draws from multiple forms of existing guidance, e.g., from United Nations agencies, and discusses how to align good practice with challenging elements of local context (in any region, not just the Caribbean). <https://capseah.safeguardingsupporthub.org/>

In addition to CAPSEAH, which lists key documents and standards, programme managers are encouraged to use:

- FCDO Due diligence: Safeguarding for external partners, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/dfid-enhanced-due-diligence-safeguarding-for-external-partners>
- IASC Guidelines, Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action, 2019 <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/iasc-guidelines-on-inclusion-of-persons-with-disabilities-in-humanitarian-action-2019>
- IASC Six Core Principles Relating to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse <https://psea.interagencystandingcommittee.org/update/iasc-six-core-principles>
- The Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS): Nine commitments to people affected by crises <https://www.corehumanitarianstandard.org/the-standard>



Guide to good programming: safeguarding for at-risk workers (continued)

To mainstream safeguarding within organisations, the Safeguarding Support and Resource Hub (<https://safeguardingsupporthub.org>) has free and accessible tip sheets, explainer notes, and guides on thematic areas of safeguarding, including a self-assessment tool and other practical materials (videos webinars, etc). Their resources are used by organisations of all sizes to help deliver quality safeguarding arrangements and may be applied in all sectors, including the offshore sectors.

Safeguarding and international assistance for yacht industry employees

ISWAN offers a 24/7 multilingual helpline and welfare assistance service to seafarers, including yacht crews of all nationalities, which is highly relevant to offshore workers in the Caribbean region: <https://www.iswan.org>

Guide to good programming: stopping human trafficking

Blue economy programme managers should be aware of trafficking in the region and how to spot and report it. Articles 9–13 of the UN Trafficking Protocol address mandatory prevention measures, in particular, mass media information campaigns, close cooperation with NGOs, and the creation of social and economic incentives. This suggests that blue economy programmes could play an active role in raising awareness of the spectrum of trafficking abuse, how to spot it, and how to report it to law enforcement agencies. To do so would be fulfilling a public service and helping Caribbean states fulfil their obligations under the Protocol and their international compliance requirements.

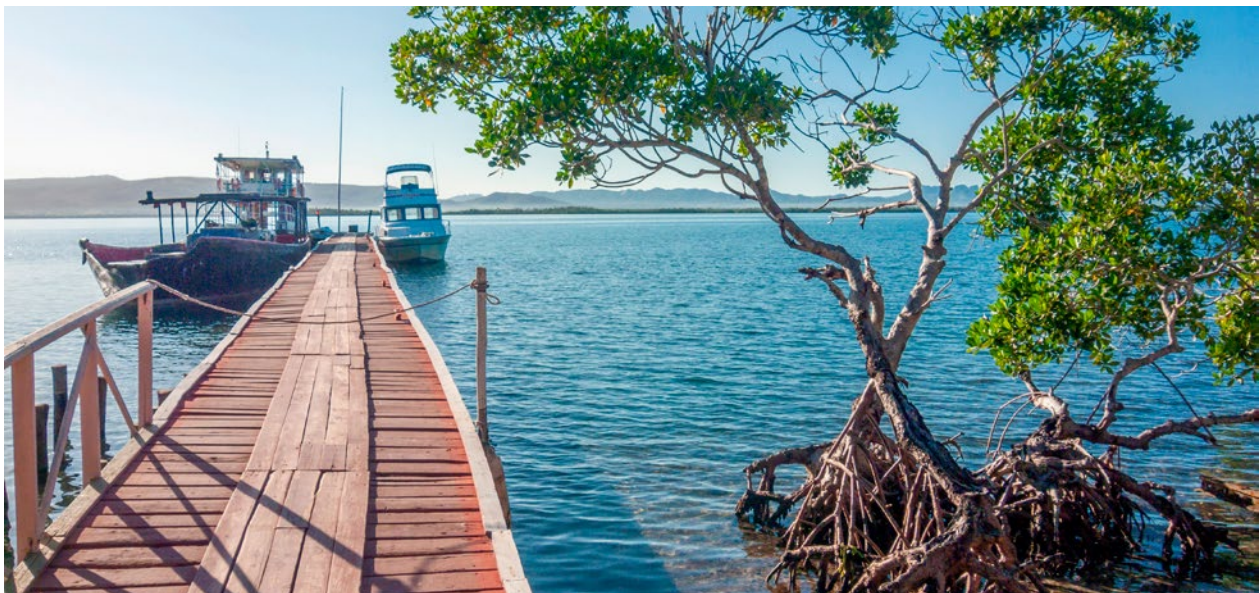


Photo by Adobe: Fishmonger in the Caribbean

5

Case studies of good practice

Case study 1: Multi-faceted gender equity approaches in Mi Costa, a Cuban ecosystem-based adaptation programme



A pier in the middle of the mangroves at Cuba Island

The Green Climate Fund-supported Mi Costa project is a USD 44 million project running from 2021 to 2029, focused on restoring and enhancing coastal ecosystems in Cuba. The project aims to increase the climate resilience of over 1.3 million vulnerable people living in the target coastal communities by employing ecosystem-based adaptation. It is restoring mangroves, swamp forests and grass swamps to improve the health of seagrass beds and coral reefs.

Mi Costa's Gender Action Plan is an example of good practice, because it targets women's full participation in all aspects of the initiative – programme design, knowledge generation and curation, knowledge application, training, capacity building and meaningful employment (GCF, 2021a, b). It has gender-transformative elements because it endeavours to shift attitudes and behaviours to become more gender equitable.





Headline-level output areas for the Mi Costa programme are:

Rehabilitated coastal ecosystems for enhanced coastal resilience and capacity to manage climate impacts. This involves restoring coastal wetland functions, rehabilitating target mangrove and swamp forests, recording the extent to which restored coastal wetlands help regenerate marine ecosystems, and monitoring groundwater recharge.

Increased technical and institutional capacity for adaptation and resilience to climate change impacts in coastal communities, governments and economic sectors. This involves developing a climate adaptation technical capacity building programme for coastal communities and local stakeholders, and integrating project-derived information (both technical and community based) from early warning systems and national datasets into a knowledge management platform and into relevant laws and policies.

Selected, gender-equitable activities include:

- Gender-equitable training delivered to target community members on coastal wetland monitoring and on the design of monitoring methodologies;
- Robust participation of women in employment created by the implementation of ecosystem-based adaptation (at least 30%);
- Robust participation of women in monitoring of marine ecosystems;
- Gender-equal participation of women in the design of ecosystem-based adaptation (EBA) content and in training delivery;
- Awareness raising and training of local government officials on responding to issues of intersectional vulnerability of women, female-headed households, the elderly, children and people living with disability, including training on environmentally sustainable production practices that reduce or avoid anthropogenic pressure on ecosystems;
- Climate information products that respond to women's information needs.

(Source: GCF (2021b) <https://www.greenclimate.fund/sites/default/files/document/fp157-gender-action-plan.pdf>)

There are associated baselines and targets for each activity. Access to any new employment opportunities created by ecosystem-based adaptation must be equal for women and men, in line with Cuban law. The targets for participation in political decision-making are all pegged at 50% for women. The gender awareness training activities at local government level are intended to create more gender-equitable attitudes and behaviours to support fully inclusive implementation of the project.

Case study 2: WeTalkingBois – changing attitudes and behaviours on gender



Photo by Barbados, Caribbean Islands

One of the most potent ways to change harmful norms around gender-based violence is male allyship with women and peer-to-peer awareness-raising. Although a society-wide phenomenon and partial solution, it is of high relevance to blue economy programming in the Caribbean.

WeTalkingBois is a Barbados-based civil society initiative that seeks to “navigate conflicts constructively while fostering allyship in the fight against gender-based violence” (WeTalkingBois, 2025; see also Caribbean Community Climate Change Centre, 2024). It does so through communications work across various media, hosting conflict resolution workshops for boys and men, and mentoring male allies through confidential networks and challenges. (Find more details on their LinkedIn page <https://www.linkedin.com/company/wetalkingbois/>. WeTalkingBois ultimately aims to engage men in reflecting on and discussing their feelings about masculinity and to explore the potential for more respectful personal and social relations.

The work of WeTalkingBois is an example of how targeting men and boys for action on gender equality is an effective measure. With skilled trainers, it can be deployed in different forms in workplaces and broader community engagement.

Case study 3: The Sustainable Management of shared Living Marine Resources project – addressing the specific priorities of women and young people in fisheries



Photo by Grenada fish market, Kashia Gie, licensed CC BY-NC-SA 2.0 via flickr

The Global Environment Facility (GEF) and UNDP supported the Caribbean Regional Fisheries Mechanism (CRFM) on a major project entitled “Catalysing Implementation of the Strategic Action Programme for the Sustainable Management of shared Living Marine Resources in the CLME+” (where CLME+ stands for the Caribbean and North Brazil Shelf Large Marine Ecosystems”) until 2020. The project, focused on promoting the sustainability of flying fish management and harvest in the region, had a targeted gender and youth component. This component, led by EnGen Collaborative, interviewed 46 stakeholders to gather data on gender equality, youth engagement, and decent work gaps and opportunities in fisheries.

Research was focused on Barbados, Dominica, Grenada, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and Trinidad and Tobago, with a view to informing and improving practice across the 17 countries of the CFRM area (Granat et al., 2020). It identified four priority areas for mobilising action and investment to significantly improve decent work prospects for women in the sector, whose work is often invisible and unpaid, and for young people, who are disproportionately unemployed in the region.

The four priority areas identified were:

- Priority 1: Enhance collection and analysis of comprehensive sex-disaggregated socioeconomic data in fisheries.
- Priority 2: Increase understanding of the differentiated social and cultural factors impacting labour and poverty of women, men, and youth in fisheries, and gender-responsive approaches to address these issues.
- Priority 3: Enhance cross-sectoral collaboration and knowledge generation on gender equality and youth engagement in fisheries.
- Priority 4: Strengthen engagement with fisherfolk organisations and local-level stakeholders on implementing gender-responsive approaches in fisheries (Granat et al., 2020).





The team provided awareness-raising and training webinars on the findings to stakeholders across the countries involved, and produced gender and fisheries action plans for Dominica, Grenada, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and Trinidad and Tobago.

The work informed a regional Gender Analysis, Strategy and Action Plan (Gender ASAP) for the CRFM that ran from 2020 to 2025 (CRFM, 2020). The Action Plan, published and adopted by the CRFM, pulled together analysis of the national, regional and international policy and legal commitments that were available to leverage for more effective and inclusive fisheries practices in Caribbean SIDS. It included the following specific indicators to track progress in action over the delivery period:

- number of sex-disaggregated socioeconomic indicators (new or updated to include sex disaggregation) relating to fisheries developed and collected;
- number of secretariat members and member state representatives with increased capacity (measured by participation in capacity building workshop sessions) on gender–fisheries linkages;
- number of gender–fisheries focal points participating in capacity building workshops on gender equality and youth engagement in fisheries;
- number of fisherfolk organisation representatives and local-level stakeholders included in stakeholder engagement (CRFM, 2020).

For each priority action area and related impact indicator, activities were mapped out for national fisheries and relevant government departments, and for the CRFM Secretariat. The Gender ASAP Plan is also recommended reading for its “Gender equality and fisheries” country annexes, which present detailed information on Dominica, Grenada, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and Trinidad and Tobago.

The project team used the gender and youth components of the project to drive effective GEDSI analysis for fisheries in the five focal countries, with implications for the larger region, and to generate a robust Action Plan that serves the regional fisheries mechanism (EnGen Collective, u.d.).



Lagun Beach on the Caribbean island of Curacao

6

Conclusion

The key messages for gender equality, disability and social inclusion in sustainable blue economy programming in Caribbean SIDS may be summed up as follows.

Environmental trends and opportunities

- **Intersecting environmental pressures.** Caribbean SIDS have long faced a complex set of environmental pressures with intersecting and compounding effects. These include harm from climate change, overfishing, habitat loss, and unsustainable management. These threats are visibly affecting key sectors of the blue economy, and the workers and communities who depend on them. Tourism dominates many Caribbean SIDS economies. The beaches at the centre of the region's tourism offering are already affected by climate change including by beach scouring and erosion from sea-level rise and storm surges, and coral reef damage from increasingly warm, acidic and deoxygenated ocean waters. Beaches and coastal-marine environments are also harmed by direct human activity, such as unregulated sand mining. Fisheries is another blue economy sector that is particularly exposed and vulnerable to the effects of climate change and direct mismanagement of natural resources. Although fishing contributes comparatively little to the national income of Caribbean SIDS, it shapes the cultural identity of coastal communities and contributes nutritional diversity to human diets.
- **Innovation.** Caribbean SIDS are also distinguished by entrepreneurial innovation in tackling environmental challenges. This includes, for example, generating economic benefit from invasive lionfish and creating biofuel and ecologically manufactured products from the influx of Sargassum on eastern Caribbean beaches.

Development trends

- **Age and disability.** The region is characterised by its ageing population, brought about by increases in life expectancy and declines in fertility rates. This trend is leading to a rise in the proportion of Caribbean residents living with disabilities, with the trend anticipated to continue in the decades ahead. Already, workers in small-scale inshore fisheries of the Caribbean region are older and likely to face health and disability issues in the future. The

informality of the sector means that many fisheries workers (both offshore and onshore, in capture, processing and value chains) lack occupational health and safety support and social protection. While this cannot be fixed overnight, there is a great deal that governments, businesses and development partners can do to invest in safer, more dignified working conditions for their employees, contractors and suppliers. More could also be done to support existing networks of fisherfolk in organising, exchanging knowledge and experience, and articulating their needs.

- **Gender and intersectional inequities.** A very high proportion of households in the region are female headed. Most of these are unmarried women with children, i.e., women who have never married the father of their children. It is common for adult women and adolescent girls to have to support many dependents: children, elderly relatives and non-economically active adults. Single or unmarried women are far less likely than married women to have bank accounts and access to credit. Women's lack of economic empowerment may make them more vulnerable to falling into poverty as a result of both endogenous and exogenous shocks, and may also make it more challenging for them to recover from shocks. This vulnerability is all the greater for the subset of people who are women and/or informal workers and/or living with disability and/or single and/or migrant. People with these intersecting characteristics face multiple forms of discrimination and a persistent lack of access to social protection, banking and credit. Context-specific analysis and targeted interventions are required to address these development deficits, often involving the collaborative efforts of multiple agencies and actors.
- **Sustainability education and training.** Young people and especially young women are disproportionately unemployed and there is a pressing need to generate decent jobs and retain young talent in the Caribbean. Climate and environment mainstreaming could be much better integrated into Caribbean SIDS' educational curricula, vocational and technical training, to foster young people's sustainability leadership in all sectors of the economy, including the blue economy. That said, many young people have already stepped up to become environment and sustainability leaders. They need access to more resources and political support to scale up their initiatives.
- **In Caribbean SIDS, there are many initiatives that provide sources of good practice to inspire future programming.** These include highly tailored interventions to boost gender equality in the blue economy, such as the GCF-funded Mi Costa programme, along with a wealth of civil society initiatives working on the economic and social empowerment of informal workers in the fisheries and coastal-marine sector, such as the fisherfolk-led networks of the Eastern Caribbean (some of which also target under served women fishers). It is also important to note that the national climate change plans and strategies of Caribbean SIDS (e.g. Nationally Determined Contributions and just transition strategies) incorporate many entry points for gender equality and social inclusion. Several Caribbean governments are now actively developing strategies for just transitions to low-carbon, climate-resilient societies that will empower groups such as women and young people, who have hitherto been marginalised. Development partners' sustainable blue economy programmes should align their support directly with such initiatives.

Safeguarding issues

- **Human trafficking.** By its nature, human trafficking is illicit and largely invisible. Patchy journalistic and academic investigations signal that it is a concern in the Caribbean SIDS region, and that governments should be more vigilant. Reports highlight that Haitian migrants of all genders are especially vulnerable to forced labour borne of economic insecurity, and that the trafficking of adolescent and adult women for sex across the island of Hispaniola and across Caribbean islands also exists. Forced labour and deprivation of basic workers' rights have also been documented in isolated locations such as remote tourist atolls, where workers become essentially trapped by their employers and their desperate economic circumstances. Globally, there is a heightened risk of such abuses in offshore work such as the yachting, cruise ship and general shipping industries, although Caribbean-specific data is difficult to find.
- **Gender-based violence (GBV).** In common with other countries worldwide, gender-based violence is rife in Caribbean societies. This contributes to what the United Nations calls a "silent epidemic". GBV should not be tolerated at any level. There is much work still to do in Caribbean SIDS to call out the unacceptability of GBV and tackle it.
- **Violence against children.** Violent disciplinary action in the home and community is widespread in this region, too, and has been normalised in cultural practice, notwithstanding various regional and national initiatives of government to strengthen children's rights.
- **LGBTQI+ rights.** As the legal status of LGBTQI+ people varies greatly from one Caribbean SIDS to another, individuals who engage in homosexual activities may not be protected by law and are criminalised and persecuted in several Caribbean countries. Further, people who look recognisably gay, transgender or queer may also be subject to heightened discrimination and even targeted for interpersonal violence. The degree of enforcement of laws and the tenor of social mores also vary greatly, even from one location to another in a single country.

Practical advice for programme managers

This report has highlighted the importance of thorough GEDSI analyses at the inception of any project or programme, to establish the differential vulnerabilities and risks experienced by different groups of people. These analyses should be undertaken by local or national GEDSI experts with detailed contextual knowledge and sociocultural grounding. It is also vital to carry out options assessments that look adequately at the risks of action for different groups and establish risk mitigation measures for each potential action. This needs to be done before options are selected, and before programme planning and implementation begin.

This report has flagged that there are several groups within Caribbean societies who are economically, politically or socially marginalised, or a combination of all. Programme managers should be attuned to the specific forms of discrimination and development challenge faced by these groups, which cut across sustainable blue economy development. For all of these groups, activities can be undertaken that are sensitive or responsive to their challenges (GEDSI sensitive/responsive). However, to effect more transformative approaches to inequality, work on social norm shifts is required and can be hard-wired into programming. The following key action steps are recommended:

- **Publicly recognise people’s legal rights, champion and/or celebrate them openly**, to increase the social recognition and value of these rights, especially when there is resistance around the implementation of rights. For example, talk openly and often about the need to achieve gender equality and how to make this happen.
- **Increase the voices of historically under-served groups in programmatic decision-making** by creating leadership and/or advisory opportunities for them, supported by any capacity-strengthening or support measures they say they need.
- **Give people the tools to recognise and correct their own discriminatory behaviours**, even if they are non-intentional, and to promote equity in their life and work. This can be done through awareness raising campaigns and training.
- **Provide teams with political leadership on GEDSI issues by appointing a senior manager(s)** to take accountability and ensure that an accessible leader(s) is on call to discuss equity and inclusion issues.
- **On LGBTQI+ issues, it is imperative that programme managers and staff familiarise themselves with both the laws and the social norms** in the areas where they will be operating, to protect the personal safety of those concerned. Unlike discrimination against women, for instance, which is expressly outlawed by Caribbean SIDS (but just lagging in implementation), the situation is different for people on the spectrum of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions and sex characteristics. Homosexual acts are explicitly criminalised in the laws of some Caribbean SIDS. Social attitudes are hostile towards non-cisgender, heterosexual conforming people in some places. Local advice is key. This report provides pointers to excellent sources of location-specific advice.
- **Ensure that GEDSI is not merely a tick box exercise** during inception phases of a programme or project. It is imperative that risks, risk mitigation measures and empowerment pathways for specific groups that are identified at GEDSI assessment and options selection stage are adequately addressed and integrated through planning and implementation, and through monitoring, evaluation and learning systems. Many sources of guidance cited in this report provide step-by-step support on how to do this. These include decision support tools created especially for the Caribbean, such as the OECS Commission 2020 toolkit for building resilience with nature and gender.
- **Recognise and enforce people’s land and natural resource rights** through programme operations. Often there is lack of clarity, and/or poor understanding on the part of local people about their land tenure rights, and their rights to access and use other natural resources. It is not uncommon for private businesses to cut off access to beaches and other resources that should be open to the public. Furthermore, some ownership and land use rights have become blurred over the years in the context of trying to address colonial-era misappropriation. It may be helpful to seek governmental or independent legal advice to clarify the status of tenure and access regimes in specific contexts.

On safeguarding, specifically:

- **Blue economy programmes may inadvertently put vulnerable groups at greater risk of harm if programmes have not hard-wired safeguarding procedures into their operations. Tools are available to centre safeguarding** in every programme. The Common Approach to Sexual Exploitation, Abuse and Harassment (CAPSEAH) provides robust and detailed guidance on setting up safeguarding systems for organisations and programmes that can be applied to a wide variety of sub-sectors and contexts.
- **Programmes can signpost to appropriate (external) sources of help and support for sufferers of inter-personal violence**, such as the ones signposted in this report, even if programmes themselves are not mandated as service providers to reduce violence against the person.
- **Leverage legal instruments for safeguarding.** Caribbean SIDS have adopted international legal frameworks to eliminate gender-based violence (the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, CEDAW), violence against children (the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, CRC) and human trafficking (the Palermo Protocol). In addition to ratifying these, most Caribbean SIDS have also transposed these into national law, as is required by their legal systems, in order for the laws to take force. Many Caribbean SIDS also publish national progress reports on CEDAW and CRC implementation.

While programme managers may implement best practice in safeguarding, based on such guidance as CAPSEAH (above), these legal instruments provide a further basis for designing and enforcing safeguarding protocols in Caribbean SIDS, and a route for recourse to justice where people's rights are found to be breached.

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In the case of works that are widely available as pdfs on the internet, no url is given, as the reader may easily find these via an internet search, using the title given. Urls are provided for references that are solely web pages or web articles, and for academic works that have a DOI number.

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