



## FORUM

# Raising the Issue of the Management of the Caribbean Sea in Samoa

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**Abstract:** *In their preparations for the 3<sup>rd</sup> SIDS conference in Samoa in 2014, Caribbean SIDS do not appear to be according a high priority to issues pertaining to the Caribbean Sea. The paper argues that these countries should place the Caribbean Sea with its resources at the centre of their development strategy. Apart from enhancing their own development prospects, repositioning the Caribbean Sea at the centre of development policy will align the region with the Pacific SIDS' rebranding of themselves as Large Ocean States.*

**Keywords:** Caribbean Sea, marine space, development strategy, energy

Including their exclusive economic zones (EEZ), Caribbean countries have more marine than terrestrial space. The total EEZ of the member countries of the Caribbean Regional Fisheries Mechanism (CRFM) is about 5 times the total land area, and if the two countries with large land areas, Guyana and Suriname, are excluded, the total EEZ is more than 22 times the total land area of the rest of the countries.<sup>1</sup>

Yet their development strategies pay little attention to their marine space and resources. Further, they are archipelagic states consisting of many islands. Most consist of an inhabited main island, with several uninhabited smaller, and even tiny, islands. In some cases, like St. Vincent and the Grenadines and Trinidad and

Tobago, some minor islands are also inhabited. The continental territories, Belize, Guyana, and Suriname, also have islands attached to them, and in the case of Guyana, there is an island in the Essequibo River that is larger than Barbados. If their policy-makers viewed these countries as archipelagos, then the Caribbean Sea in the spaces between the landmasses would be more likely to be central to their visions of their respective countries. Instead, the focus on the main island or continental landmass tends to ignore the lesser islands, especially those that are uninhabited. As a result, the Caribbean Sea falls outside of their vision and planning, and more often than not, it is seen as the means of disconnection from, rather than the connection to, other regional countries.

Jamaica, for example, has several reasons to pay attention to the Caribbean Sea in its policy processes. The International Seabed Authority established under the Law of the Sea is located downtown Kingston. Only recently, the Secretary-General of the organization bemoaned the fact that the Jamaican public was unaware of its existence. Likewise, it is not generally known that the Regional Coordinating Unit of UNEP's Caribbean Action Plan is cited in Kingston. Jamaica has a functioning Council for Ocean and Coastal Zone Management, but it is primarily focused on the coast of the main island.

Development plans rarely mention even the Pedro Cays, the largest off-shore fishing banks, and by far the most economically important of the smaller islands. By implication, the coastal resources of these smaller islands have not been seen as sufficiently important for inclusion in national plans. Parenthetically, two small islands – Large Goat Island and Small Goat Island – are the centre of controversy in 2013 over whether the Government should grant these islands and contiguous areas to a Chinese company that is seeking to invest in logistic hub facilities in Jamaica. The Government is promoting this 'large investment' project as a boost to the economy's earnings of foreign exchange and employment. Critics argue that the islands are located in a Protected Area and a Ramsar site, that the project will disrupt a fragile marine and coastal environment, and that there are other locations that will be better suited for such a mega-project. It is the first time many Jamaicans have even heard the names of these islands, much less their importance to the local environment.

In the wider Caribbean Region, countries have committed to collaboration in ocean governance since the United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development (UNCED)

through Agenda 21, the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the Barbados Programme of Action (BPOA) and many other multilateral agreements.<sup>2</sup> In fact, there is a network of regional organizations that have something to do with the Caribbean Sea.<sup>3</sup>

In 2008, the Association of Caribbean States (ACS) launched the Caribbean Sea Commission to promote and oversee the sustainable use of the Caribbean Sea. Five years later, Caribbean SIDS still need to recognize the coordinating role of the Commission and to fund its secretariat. While a mechanism to manage the common marine resources has been posited, without the necessary recognition and resources, the Commission cannot function effectively, and the unsustainable practices that threaten the Caribbean Sea will continue unabated. This neglect is probably due to the fiscal constraints faced by the states as well as the narrow focus of the policy-makers on developing the terrestrially based economic activities.

A year before the 3<sup>rd</sup> Conference of SIDS in Samoa in 2014, it is not clear whether the Caribbean SIDS intend to raise issues about the Caribbean Sea. The Caribbean Sea appeared as one of several topics in panel 5 on day 1 of the planned 3-day regional Caribbean SIDS conference in Kingston in July 2013. Similarly, not much attention was paid to the Sea in Jamaica's national consultations in preparation for Samoa.

In a document prepared by CARICOM for a Council of Trade and Economic Development (COTED) meeting in June 2013, climate change and sea level rise appears in several places as an issue, and in one place, the Sea itself is referred to as an asset:

Most Caribbean SIDS generally have limited resources, many of which are heavily exploited; they also possess hitherto, unexploited natural capital including mineral resources in terrestrial areas, EEZs and the deep sea as well as hydrocarbons, virgin fish stocks and potential pharmaceutical products.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, CARICOM, the organization mandated to chart the paths to regional integration drew the attention of the leading policy-makers of the member states to the resources of the 'EEZs and the deep sea', and highlighted their importance by noting that the Caribbean SIDS had limited resources. It is not that the policy-makers were unaware of these resources, nor the scarcity of resources in general for the region's development. Instead, it appears to be a terrestrial bias to the prevailing ideology of

development that tends to marginalize the perception of the potential of marine resources.

Earlier in 2013, an Expert Group meeting on oceans was convened at UN Headquarters in New York. The keynote address by Ambassador Jumeau for Climate Change and SIDS for the Seychelles focused on the two specific vulnerabilities of SIDS: high indebtedness and the vulnerability to extreme weather, both particularly relevant to Caribbean SIDS.<sup>5</sup> Throughout the discussions, linkages were drawn between environmental concerns and social and economic development. This was especially apparent in the discussion of fisheries, and the discussion of the Caribbean Sea as a Special Area for sustainable development.

One Caribbean participant in the meeting noted the weak participation of Caribbean experts in the meeting, and in the associated briefing by the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS). This was yet another indicator that the Caribbean countries could do more to prepare the region for the meeting in Samoa, and, in particular, to elevate the Caribbean Sea in the list of priority issues to be raised at the summit. It is also true that the region's diplomatic services have been stretched to meet the escalating international agenda arising from the many international agreements within the tightening fiscal constraints on public expenditure for the respective foreign services. Caribbean governments will have to balance sharper focus on critical issues, with maintaining broad coverage of their international commitments. There is a case for including the management of the Caribbean Sea within the narrowing list of priorities through closer regional cooperation to maximize the international presence of limited diplomatic resources.

There is evidence that the Pacific SIDS are rebranding themselves as Large Ocean States with a focus on their high value fisheries and deep-sea minerals, in an explicit move away from highlighting their vulnerability as the basis for special attention by the international community. In declaring the theme of the 43<sup>rd</sup> Pacific Leaders' Forum to be the 'Large Ocean Island States – the Pacific Challenge', the Prime Minister of the Cook Islands cited the decision of the Forum in the previous year to recognize the responsibility of the Pacific Island countries for the Pacific Ocean, and to see its critical role in their sustainable development. Specifically, he referred to the Pacific as an 'Ocean of opportunity and that capitalizing on its potential was crucial for the future of the Pacific and the livelihoods of Pacific Island people'.<sup>6</sup> He cited

the ancestral view of the inseparable connection between the people and their environment and between their land and the surrounding Ocean. On the basis of this he proposed that:

Whilst the Cook Islands fully supports the need for international recognition to be given of the special needs and vulnerability of our island states as SIDS, I also think it is time to recognize and reflect in our national and regional strategies a greater balance in the inter-relationship between our islands and the large ocean realm in which we live.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps it is time for the Caribbean SIDS to put the Caribbean Sea at the centre of their development strategies as well. It is widely reported that only 10% of Caribbean reefs have live coral cover, and that most are dead or dying. The region's tourism depends heavily on its beaches, and both tourism and coastal livelihoods depend heavily on fishing. The Caribbean Sea is very important for transportation through the Panama Canal, intra-regional transport of commercial goods, and coastal transportation for many countries. Finally, the Sea is highly valued in Caribbean culture.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) 'AR4' projection is for the sea level to rise 0.18 to 0.59 meters over the course of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Based on more recent data, Caribsave is projecting a 1.5 meter to 2 meter rise in the sea level.<sup>8</sup> Even the most conservative projections suggest that sea level rise will pose threats to the existence of some Caribbean SIDS, like the Cayman and Turks and Caicos Islands, as well as the coastal regions of the other countries.

Caribbean SIDS should consider rebranding themselves as maritime states with a development strategy that revolves around rebuilding fish stocks, and developing marine parks and recreational facilities in the inshore. They should explore the feasibility of ocean thermal and wave energy as alternatives to imported fossil fuels. There is a challenge of providing fresh water for countries with limited resources of freshwater of their own. Indeed, the Caribbean Sea should be seen as a central shared resource for development.

Over-fishing by commercial fishers, many of whom are external to the region, has depleted fish stocks in the Caribbean. The strategic plan of the Caribbean Regional Fisheries Mechanism, 2007-2012, proposed promotion of sanctuaries, establishing artificial reefs, and regulation of commercial fishing, including

catches taken by 'distant waters fishing vessels'<sup>9</sup> – as key elements of the management of regional fish stocks.

The costs of sea level rise will be very high because of the pattern of commercial and residential development in the coastal zones of the Caribbean SIDS. The extreme case of Georgetown, Guyana which is already seven feet below sea level protected by an expensive sea wall is illustrative of the challenge of managing the impact of sea level rise. The sustainable strategy will be to move development inland away from the coast on a gradual basis so as to risk sudden destruction and disaster from extreme wave actions. There will still remain the risk of contamination of ground water resources.

Proper management of the Caribbean Sea and the relationship of Caribbean societies to the Sea, requires data and information from regular, instituted, research processes on current activities, as well as the monitoring of studies of the impacts of climate change on the region.

The same strategies that will manage the fisheries will also contribute to the marine attractions – sport fishing and diving – for tourists. Marine parks can serve as fish sanctuaries and non-motorized recreational activities that are consistent with sustainable tourism.

The Caribbean Sea is also a potential source of ocean thermal energy. Al Binger has long been an advocate of OTEC for SIDS, with theoretical and practical experience in research and project development. In addition to energy, he argues that OTEC plants produce cold water that can be used for mariculture and fresh water that can be used for hydroponics.<sup>10</sup> The Bahamas Electricity Corporation was reported in 2011 to have signed an agreement with a USA based company to build two (2) OTEC plants.<sup>11</sup> In the context of the long-run increase in imported petroleum and the short-run imperative to cut back on the discharge of the green house gases discharged from petroleum based power plants, OTEC and other alternative renewable energy sources warrant priority consideration from Caribbean policy-makers.

The Caribbean SIDS should raise the issues of the protection and management of the Caribbean Sea in Samoa. They are likely to resonate with the new emphasis of the Pacific states on their marine resources. The marine space of the Caribbean and the other SIDS will broaden their identity in international negotiations, and raise the importance of the management of oceans and seas for economic development of the SIDS that they surround. In addition,

the mainstreaming of the oceans in development strategy will link naturally with the energy strategy based on SIDS DOCK, which will be a centerpiece of the Samoa meeting.

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

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## NOTES

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- <sup>2</sup> See CERMES, 'Policy Perspectives: Emerging Ocean Governance in the Wider Caribbean', 2011, University of the West Indies, Cave Hill Campus, Barbados
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3
- <sup>4</sup> Working document for the Forty-fourth special Meeting of the Council for Trade and Economic Development – Environment and Sustainable Development, Videoconference, 14 June 2013, COTED(Spec)/2013/44/2, p.39, CARICOM, Georgetown, Guyana
- <sup>5</sup> Notes from the Expert Group Meeting
- <sup>6</sup> Hon Henry Puna, Speech to the Pacific Islands Leaders Forum of 2012, <http://www.forumsec.org/resources/uploads/attachments/documents/Forum%20Theme%202012.pdf>
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*
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