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# Poverty & Sustainable Livelihoods in the Caribbean

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## INTRODUCTION

The sustainability of current livelihood practices of the poor in the coastal environment in the Caribbean, was the focus of research conducted in four case-study sites in St Lucia and Belize, during 2002 - 2003. Against the background of a national poverty profile based on survey data, poor communities and individuals were identified using census data.

The communities were identified as poor on the basis of their non-possession of social infrastructure. Within these communities, individuals were identified as poor based on their labour market status. This included their employment status as well as their educational and skills certification levels. By use of these criteria, the greatest levels of impoverishment were found among women and youth.

The poor mainly engage with the coastal environment as a means of livelihood in fishing, sea moss cultivation and tourism. There was a gendered use of the marine resource that seemed to coincide with domestic roles. Men were the persons who mainly exploited the marine environment by fishing, with the control of the ventures in the hands of older men. Lacking control of capital, young men generally played subordinate roles in this activity. Women were involved in sea moss cultivation and certain aspects of tourism.

Of the uses that have been made of the sea, fishing proved to be the most unsustainable. Because of their dependence on the resource, poor people have had to bear the greatest share of the burden involved in attempts to correct it.; though they bear least responsibility for the state of affairs. This is particularly evident where the establishment of marine parks has placed limits on their access to the natural resources of the sea.

The profile of the poor that emerges from the study is that of individuals with little or no education and very poor prospects on the job market. They live in moderate to poor housing in communities with non-existent, or poorly developed, social infrastructure. Across the case study sites, the strategies varied from total reliance on the marine resource to the practice of an occupational multiplicity that included the use of the marine environment. In all the communities, people recognised the limitations of harvesting the sea-life stock as a source of livelihood, and they consequently sought alternative livelihoods. One common demand in this regard was for tourism in a variety of forms, including heritage and eco-tourism. Other alternatives included sea moss cultivation and agriculture.

## KEY ISSUES ADDRESSED :

**The following key issues are addressed in this Policy Brief:**

- **Existing and alternative livelihoods of poor people on the coast in St Lucia and Belize;**
- **Constraints on adopting alternatives;**
- **Recommendations to overcome constraints;**
- **Lessons learned re evaluating vulnerability, and their implications.**

### ST LUCIA: Anse La Raye

*“The use made of the marine and coastal environment in its role as receptacle rather than provider has led to a marked decline in its waters as a source of livelihood for the poor in Anse La Raye. It means that environmental degradation has played a causative role in the existence of poverty in the community.”*

#### Alternatives/Enhancements identified:

- More efficient use of the sea by fishers: in the short term through capital and training to equip them to work in deeper waters; in the medium to long term by implementing proper waste disposal systems, thereby restoring the immediate coastal environment;
- Improved and expanded fishing cooperative;
- More cooperation between Fish Fry vendors and the fishing cooperatives;
- Mobilisation, training and organisation of young people to make effective use of government initiatives.

### BELIZE: Sarteneja

*“Fishing is the major economic activity for the people of Sarteneja. As they themselves put it, ‘Sarteneja is fishing and fishing is Sarteneja. Without fishing there is no Sarteneja.’ In early days, livelihoods were earned through a combination of fishing and farming. Today, one fisherman estimates, only 25 per cent of the fishermen of Sarteneja are involved both in fishing and in farming.... Estimates of the number of fishermen in Belize range from 3,000 to 3,500. Fishermen from Sarteneja make up as much as one third of this number.”*

#### Alternatives identified:

- Heritage Tourism or Eco-tourism—both requiring improved systems of micro credit or financing as well as training and participation in planning;
- Boat-building;
- Tour guiding.

### ST LUCIA: Praslin

*“The sea is an important provider of livelihood for this community. Adult respondents report two generations of ancestors that made their living from fishing. Fishing and the growing of sea moss are the two main forms of income-earning activities involving the sea. These activities though are very much a part of a multiplicity of occupational endeavours”*

#### Alternatives identified:

- Agriculture, mainly bananas and root crops at present, though marketing is a constraint;
- Agro-industry, particularly packaging of fish and dried fruit;
- Sea moss cultivation and processing.

### BELIZE: Hopkins

*“Fishing in Hopkins has been a part of the subsistence tradition of the people. This means that, in the main, it is artisan in character, pursued on a small-scale basis to meet daily needs rather than as a major business activity... Unlike in the north, the social structure of Hopkins has not been shaped by commercialism and the inequitable distribution of land associated with plantation agriculture. This has produced a flat social structure with relatively low levels of monetisation. This, however, would have been modified with the establishment of citrus and banana plantations in the areas immediately beyond the community, external migration and the coming of foreign tourist investors...Tourism (is) a combination of small guest houses owned by the locals and large plants built by foreign capital. Many locals find employment in these foreign concerns.”*

#### Alternatives identified:

- Alternative uses of the marine environment based on correcting its misuse by the non-poor, especially the activity of fishing trawlers;
- Development of sun, sand and sea tourism, nature tourism and eco-cultural tourism. Encouragement of an interface between upscale, and village-based tourism products, with micro credit facilities created to support local guesthouses run by community members in their own homes and buildings;
- Sports fishing;
- Tour guiding;
- Sea moss cultivation;
- Land reform and agriculture, including aquaculture;
- Co-management of marine protected areas.

## CONSTRAINTS ON ADOPTING ALTERNATIVES

Factors operating at the institutional and personal levels placed constraints on the adoption of alternatives. Among institutional factors were the absence of suitable credit facilities; land tenure (and distribution); a macro-policy framework tending to promote the interests of the rich and to neglect those of the poor; and under-developed physical infrastructure.

At the personal level, the constraints included low levels of education and training; single parenthood; and a heavy dependency burden on the population of working age.

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO OVERCOME CONSTRAINTS

Recommendations for the use of natural resources, including the marine environment, to contribute to poverty eradication include:

- The creation of administrative mechanisms that link macro level policies to the interests of the poor at the community level;
- The provision of credit and training for women and young people to allow their involvement in sustainable fishing, sea moss farming, agriculture and agro-industry, tourism; and the plans that are laid for them;
- The sensitisation of policy makers and NGOs to the need for mechanisms centred on these activities as well as agriculture;
- At the policy-making level, representation of the interests of women and youth in all the key decision-making settings, rather than being confined to a specific agency or unit.

## GENERIC LESSONS LEARNED FROM ST LUCIA AND BELIZE

### **Data Constraints:**

The absence of point-in-time, absolute measures of poverty at the community levels, makes poverty evaluations done on the basis of existing data sources virtually impossible. Furthermore, it is a moot point whether measures of poverty, centred on hunger, malnutrition and homelessness, are appropriate for a study of at least one of the communities in Belize since it has a strong tradition of subsistence production.

A more productive and useful approach uses population census data to measure physical circumstances and labour market capabilities of the community. This approach allows not only for a point-in-time assessment of the circumstances of the community, it also allows for an understanding of the extent to which the communities might be vulnerable to changed circumstances in the future; for the community's adaptability is a function of its present capabilities and entitlements. It allows us to ask the 'what if' question and plan for eventualities. (One example in the recent past of the consequences that follow the failure to use this kind of approach to planning is provided by the experiences of the banana industry in St Lucia.

### **Markers of Socioeconomic Deprivation and Vulnerability:**

On the basis of this type of evaluation, all four communities studied can be said to be in a state of socioeconomic deprivation and vulnerability. In practical terms, this is given expression via a number of markers. The first is the labour market status of the population of working age. Low levels of education and training plague all four of the populations studied. They result in high levels of unemployment and discouraged workers.

## Sustaining livelihoods for people on the Caribbean coast

This Policy Brief is one output of a project to share *Policy Relevant Knowledge on Feasible Alternative Natural Resource Based Strategies for Enhancing Livelihoods*. The research base was generated in an earlier project titled, *Feasibility of Alternative, Sustainable Coastal Resource-Based Enhanced Livelihood Strategies, undertaken in 2002-2003, with case studies in St Lucia and Belize*. Other Policy Briefs in the series include:

- *Achieving Community-Based Tourism that Benefits the Poor in the Land Water Interface;*
- *Legal/Institutional & Policy Environment for Natural Resource-Based Livelihood Strategies.*

**Series Editor:** Suzanne Francis Brown  
For further reading see: *People and the Caribbean Coast. Feasibility of Alternative, Sustainable Coastal Resource-Based Enhanced Livelihood Strategies* (SEDU, 2004) and *Feasibility of Alternative, Sustainable Coastal Resource-Based Enhanced Livelihood Strategies* (R8135). Technical Report of Team Activities and Findings (SEDU)

## Generic Lessons Learned (Cont'd)

From labour market capabilities and experiences it becomes evident that women, women heading households, their dependents, and young people in all four communities experience the greatest levels of economic distress, and are particularly vulnerable to unfavourable changes that might beset the communities.

The second marker is demographic. It tells of relatively high levels of fertility in all four communities, and a consequent heavy dependency burden on the population of working age. Improved health conditions in previous decades also means increases in average life spans and, therefore, the added burden of the aged.

The third marker is productive. It tells of limited access to agricultural land by people in the communities studied.

The final marker is infrastructural. It varies by country, so that the Belizean problem of lack of proper roads is not the problem of the communities in St Lucia. There are commonalities, however. The first of these is garbage disposal. The second is sewage disposal. This latter problem plagues the communities in St Lucia and has only recently been corrected in one of the communities in Belize. The statistic for Anse La Raye bears repeating. Here, just in excess of two thirds of the households report no toilet facilities.

### Implications for the Practice of Sustainable Livelihoods

The implications for the practice of sustainable livelihoods are profound. In the first place, they result in a heavy economic and physical burden being placed on the marine environment in all of the localities studied. When it is considered that this resource is threatened by other social and natural forces, then the precariousness and vulnerability of the people in the Caribbean coastal zone is brought into sharp relief. The obvious recommendation is rationalisation and diversification. Both processes go hand in hand. Proper management of the coastal resources is going to result in fewer persons making a living from the exploitation of the sea life. The idea is that those who remain should do so in a more efficient and sustainable way. Those who leave fishing must be provided with alternative forms of livelihood, some involving the sea, others terrestrial resources.

A host of changes at the local, national, regional and international levels must accompany rationalisation and diversification. Fuller treatment is provided in *People and the Caribbean Coast. Feasibility of Alternative, Sustainable Coastal Resource-Based Enhanced Livelihood Strategies* (SEDU, 2004) Suffice it to say that they all demand a new role of the state. On a global level, during the past three or four decades, government's role in the life of the society has changed from one of total involvement to non-involvement. Since there is good reason to support lessened direct involvement of the state, these suggestions do not call for yet another reversal of roles. Rather, government's role must now be twofold—umpire and organiser. The first involves making sure that the forces of the market do not overwhelm the needy to the gain of the wealthy. The second entails the fitting of community need with civil society, or private sector provider. Furthermore, if these processes are fundamental to the building of capacity and resilience in the community, then empowerment and participation of ordinary citizens must be the basis on which these endeavours are themselves constructed. Social capital, in a word, is indispensable to economic development and social order.

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