

Climate change: a Caribbean perspective

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ABSTRACT

Climate change has been expedited by human activity. The Caribbean has seen the rapid progression of climate change, global warming and its harmful effects. In the Caribbean, we have an abundance of natural wonders and are considered a tourist attraction, but the progression of global warming and climate change is proving to be a threat. Guyana, which is a booming economy in the region, is developing rapidly but trying to preserve its rainforest and co-exist sustainably with the environment. It is noted that the Caribbean is experiencing more extremes of weather conditions such as hurricanes and other adverse effects of climate change including rising sea levels and bleaching of coral reefs. It is important that, as we develop, we preserve our natural attractions which encourage tourism, our diverse flora and fauna and the health of our population. Regional groups have acknowledged this and see the importance of taking action to preserve the Caribbean and its Small Island Developing States. These Small Island Developing States are disproportionately affected by climate change considering their small contribution to Green House Gases compared to the much larger developed nations. It is of paramount importance that policies and actions materialize to combat climate change and preserve health in the region. It is also crucial that we be a voice for our region bringing the phenomenon of climate change and health in the Caribbean to the global forum.

INTRODUCTION

Climate change refers to the change in weather over a period of time. If this is a normal occurrence, why is it such a big topic of debate? Considering that it may have contributed to the extinction of certain habitats and species and was expedited by human activity, we believe that this is a topic that, as apex predators in our food chain, we should perform a thorough self-assessment moving forward.

During and after the industrial revolution in developed and developing nations like the West Indies, we have seen a rapid progression of global warming and unfortunately, some of its effects. We have seen rising sea levels, more drastic weather patterns and animal life being threatened, the latter on that list being compounded by human encroachment on the ecosystems that were previously untouched by human activity. We are now seeing deforestation like never before. We are producing energy by burning fossil fuels to boost our economy and production at the expense of our environment. Our Carbon footprint as a developing region has increased exponentially over the last century.

While boosting our economy and quality of life in the short-term, we are developing a time bomb which endangers our future generations and the environment. This is accelerated by the reaping of natural resources resulting in the progression of climate change and rapid destruction of our mother-Earth. It is prudent that we pay attention to this and set policies for our future generations to enjoy the biodiversity and atmospheric comfort that we may currently be taking for granted. In the Caribbean, we have an abundance of natural wonders such as the tropical forest, coral reefs and beautiful beaches. We have long been dependent on the tourist industry for a source of income. The Caribbean is indeed a "get-away" tourist attraction but would it always be like this? At the rate we are going- "We" being mankind globally, our activity and selfish greed will result in the destruction of our Carbon basin and heaven on Earth.

Currently, Guyana is one of the booming economies with oil being a major contributor. The Guyanese Prime Minister, the Honourable Irfaan Ali, explained that the Amazon rainforest preserved in Guyana is one of the largest globally and that measures are being made to ensure this remains unharmed by human activity. We must all have a similar mindset in developing an economy that co-exists with preserving the environment - not only focusing on the rainforest but also the beaches, coral reefs and diverse fauna.

Like the Guyanese government, it is prudent for all Caribbean nations to develop a sustainable, environmentally friendly economy with the natural resources and wonders currently available. It is admirable that Guyana is focused on this, as several parts of the world had similar opportunities, but the focus was economic gain at the expense of the environment. For example, the beautiful beaches in the Caribbean are now being threatened by rising sea levels. Similarly, the once beautiful coral reefs, such as the Buccoo Reef in Tobago, are being bleached by the rising temperatures.¹

We are now experiencing extreme weather like never before which is affecting ecosystems and human health. Within the last year, we recorded record-high temperatures, and we are seeing more frequent and severe hurricanes and floods. This gives rise to a list of diseases such as food and water-borne diseases, diseases from scarcity of nourishment for the vulnerable population and even the direct effect of heat illness. We see previously harmless factors of the atmosphere reaching new heights, such as the Saharan dust and air quality. This can cause more frequent and worse exacerbations of airway disease in humans and animals. We also find it more difficult to grow foods and self-sustain agriculture due to loss of crops from hurricanes such as Hurricane Maria in Dominica in 2017, and Hurricane Ivan devastating Grenada, our "Spice Isle" in 2004.^{2,3}

One of the main focuses on the regional front is climate change and health. The CARICOM nations agreed that action must be taken and should be taken now, as they see the youth playing a major role in tackling the issue.⁴ It is admirable that regional bodies have joined to focus on climate change and health.⁵

Hopefully, these initiatives materialise into policies and action which would tilt the balance into curbing the rapid progression of climate change. We are now called upon to be a voice for our homeland, the Caribbean. As the famous Bob Marley sang, it is time for us to '*Get up, Stand up*' and enlighten others on the disproportionate impact climate change is having on the Small Island Developing States (SIDS) that are suffering due to the actions of larger, less affected nations. We may not be producing a great proportion of Green House Gases (GHGs) but we are definitely feeling the impact as our coastline is rising, our temperatures are soaring and hurricanes are wreaking havoc. We are thus called upon to do what we can at a regional level as we advocate for a global decrease in carbon emissions.

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