

Environmental sustainability bridgetown

Barbados is one of the world's most vulnerable countries to climate change. The nation of 280,000 people is in the heart of the Caribbean, a region where hurricanes, droughts and rising seas are expected to severely impact communities in the coming years. The recent passage of Hurricane Beryl, which devastated parts of the Caribbean, including Jamaica, is a prime example of those perils.

Barbados has launched an ambitious effort to adapt to an uncertain climate future. Called Roof to Reefs, it includes everything from reinforcing homes to buttressing critical infrastructure to protecting coastal and marine ecosystems. It focuses on integrated, home-grown solutions that build resilience to the climate crisis.

That dilemma has led the country to spearhead the Bridgetown Initiative. Named after Barbados' capital, it proposes a radical rethinking of the global financial system, calling for a combination of debt relief, new lending and private sector investments in vulnerable developing countries, which would use the money explicitly to prepare for the effects of climate change.

"A climate catastrophe perhaps could hit a larger nation and it would be restricted to a particular location. But for us, it is a national event," said Travis Sinckler, a senior environment officer with the Ministry of Environment in Barbados. "We have to brace ourselves. We have children. We have a population that we need to protect."

The Bridgetown Initiative has put Barbados and its Prime Minister, Mia Mottley, at the forefront of the push for climate justice for small island developing states. This group of 39 nations, from the Caribbean to the South Pacific, faces a future of rising seas and severe storms that many have called an existential threat. For these countries, fending off climate change will cost upwards of US\$26 billion annually, an overwhelming bill given their size.

In an effort to counter climate change, Barbados has forged a strong partnership with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). During the last several years, UNEP has helped the country to strengthen its environmental management and governance systems for marine and terrestrial ecosystems. UNEP has also supported environmental tracking systems and contributed to the development of sustainable finance initiatives, while being a vocal supporter of small island states and their quest for climate justice.

It is a collaboration that goes two ways. Barbados was one of 58 nations in 2023 to contribute its full share to UNEP's Environment Fund, the organization's main source of flexible funding and the bedrock of its work on the triple planetary crisis of climate change, nature and biodiversity loss, and pollution and waste. Sinckler said that support was designed to help UNEP live up to its mandate of monitoring the state of the environment and uniting countries in a multilateral effort to protect the planet.

"We go in there, we can present our issue, and we can engage. Everyone has a voice," he said. "Us meeting our contribution to the Environment Fund is to ensure this governance modality continues and that it is representative of all countries, large and small."

The collaboration between Barbados and UNEP extends beyond action on climate change. UNEP has supported the country's efforts to conserve biodiversity, control invasive species, rein in marine pollution and phase out ozone-depleting chemicals, among other things. UNEP also helped Barbados produce its first report on the state of its environment, a second edition of which is now underway. And UNEP is supporting the nation as it modernizes its environmental governance and develops strategies for greening its economy.

Sinckler says that type of technical assistance work is vital for small island developing states, which often only have a handful of people working on environmental issues.

"If you look around the room [at international summits], small island developing states are represented by one or two people," he said. "These are the same one or two people that, at home, are implementing every convention, monitoring every aspect of the environment and engaging in meetings at the regional level. So, capacity support is significant."

The world remains off track in the effort to rein in the greenhouse gas emissions that are driving climate change. Based on current national commitments, the Earth is on pace to warm by 2.9°C since the start of the industrial era, a number that would shatter limits in the Paris Agreement.

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