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**PROGRESSION OF VULNERABILITY OF OECS STATES:
A historical analysis of root causes.**

Abstract

The image of paradise, which has made the Caribbean Islands world icons for luxury tourism, is a far cry from the harsh realities and rigors of everyday life for Caribbean peoples. Recent studies have placed these states among the most vulnerable, when compared to other small states and less developed countries in the world. Lessons learnt from natural hazard and disaster research reveal that vulnerability is rooted in everyday life and reinforced by historical patterns, which shape the political economy of societies and determine peoples' access to resources.

This study applies approaches from natural hazard research to analyse five centuries of economic evolution of the independent territories of the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS), and the underlying causes that created conditions of political, social, environmental and economic vulnerability are identified. The analysis was conducted at three levels and a conceptual integrated framework for linking all levels and dimensions of vulnerability has been developed. The framework provides a useful tool for performing cross-sectoral vulnerability assessments, identifying linkages and points of interface, and developing appropriate strategies for each dimension and scale of analysis. The results provide evidence that present strategies to reduce one type of vulnerability may exacerbate another, and in some cases may reinforce the status quo. Based on the framework, the types of vertical and horizontal integration needed to reduce vulnerability in OECS Member States are suggested.

Introduction

The image of paradise, which has made the Caribbean Islands world icons for luxury tourism, is a far cry from the harsh realities and rigors of everyday life for Caribbean

peoples. Recent studies have placed these states among the most vulnerable, when compared to other small states and less developed countries in the world. Their vulnerability has been ascribed to their small size, insularity, limited natural and human resource base and low capacity to withstand external shocks. In addition several global, regional and national developments have taken place, making life in the Eastern Caribbean States more difficult than ever before. These changes include: globalisation and erosion of traditional export markets; global climate change and sea-level rise; increased frequency of natural hazards; political instability; increased social tensions due to migration and brain drain, drug trafficking and abuse, crime and violence and the fast spreading HIV-AIDS epidemic.

These developments were addressed in assessments and reports by many agencies including the Commonwealth Secretariat (1997). While a concise overview of present conditions in Caribbean States was presented, an evaluation of historical root causes that gave rise to their vulnerable status in the first place did not form the basis of these assessments. Evidence has been provided in the emerging literature on vulnerability that an understanding of this historical vector is crucial in formulating effective development strategies (Pelling, 2001; Blaike et al, 1994). Failure to address underlying problems may reinforce the status quo and in some cases exacerbate unfavourable conditions.

This paper examines the historical roots of forces that contribute to vulnerable conditions in OECS states. A conceptual framework, which integrates concepts of vulnerability from natural hazard and disaster research, is used to perform an analysis of the sub-region. Here vulnerability is examined in all its dimensions (political, social, environmental and economic) in terms of the status of communities and their relationships within national and extra-national systems. This paper is informed by recent field visits to the region during which interviews were conducted with key personnel in public and private sector organisations, and communities.

An Integrated Framework for assessing vulnerability

Much of the current understanding and applications of the concept of vulnerability have been advanced by natural hazard and disaster research (Blaike et al., 1994). Vulnerability is widely defined as the consequence of the incidence and intensity of risks and threats, twined with its reciprocal, the ability to withstand risks and threats (resistance) and to recover from their consequences (resilience).

For this review an integrated approach to examining vulnerability is adopted thus avoiding reductionism and the blind spots encountered in current disciplinary approaches that address only one or two dimensions of vulnerability at a time. Building on the work of Kates (1971), Palm (1990), and Berke et al (1993), what follows is a systems approach that allows the dynamic interactions between human-use and bio/geophysical subsystems to be mapped out in space and time, and the flow of resources from micro to macro scales traced. The framework of analysis is designed around two models - a systems model of vulnerability and an integration model (Figure 1).

The systems model provides the tools for analysing the dynamic interactions between human-use and bio/geophysical systems. The four major dimensions to vulnerability, as explained by the model are due to: physical and environmental factors namely natural hazards and status of ecosystems; human ecology, that is the location of populations and their exposure to natural hazards; the political economy defined by historical and socio-cultural patterns, economic and political factors which direct location decisions, social status, access to resources and power roles. It is the political economy therefore, that

enables or constrains the ability to resist and recover from risks and threats. Resistance and resilience in this case ranges from physical structures to health of the environment, food security, social networks, property ownership, insurance, human resources and institutional capacity.

There are a multitude of dynamic interactions and feedback processes between the four major types of risks and threats across scales from local to global. The integration model explains these interactions between local, national, regional and global systems, through horizontal and vertical interplay between formal and informal institutions and organizations. The taxonomy of interplay between formal and informal defines the policy spaces at which governance, political, social and cultural relationships (good verses poor) occur. This gives rise to a continuum of symmetrical/asymmetrical verses unidirectional/reciprocal interactions and taxonomy of various forms of interplay, which further qualifies vulnerability, resilience and resistance. Thus the ability of communities to cope in the face of change is determined not by the actual incidence of risks and threats, but by the degree of integration and taxonomy of interplay. These principles are applied in the analysis that follows. A real-time case study of a tourism development project is also presented to illustrate the framework.

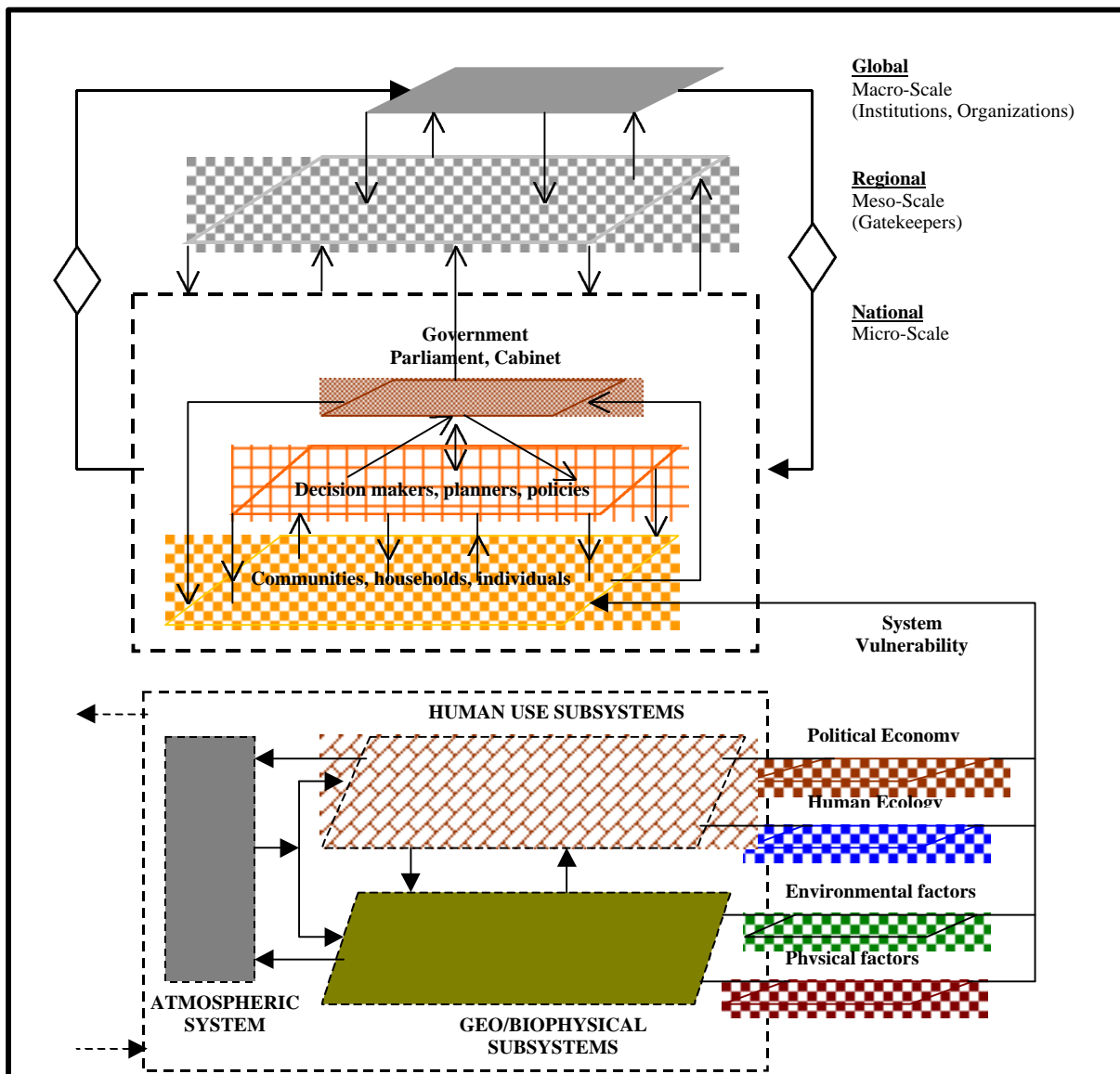


Figure 1. An integrated framework for assessing vulnerability of OECS States

The OECS: A historical perspective

The current system of politics, institutional arrangements, culture and social patterns observed in the OECS states, is deeply rooted in five hundred years of exploitation and domination by colonial interests. From 1492 to present, five distinctive periods of socio-economic evolution resulting in varying systems of governance and organisation of authority, environmental change, and radical changes in population demographics can be identified. It is an ambitious task to present 500 years in a few pages therefore only the major changes that characterize each period are summarized. These periods represent states of increasing vulnerability from communities that were self-sufficient and independent, to communities that are chronically dependent on external social and economic systems for their survival. For detailed historical accounts the work of authors such as Williams (1970), Watts (1987), and Thomas (1988) can be consulted, thus only the salient points will be presented here.

Horizontal Integration and Isolation: The first two periods in the recorded history of the region (1492-1600) can be viewed as periods of isolation and high political vulnerability. Although the native Indians had an informal self-regulating social system, it was horizontally integrated with no strong ties to extra-regional communities. The isolation of the Indian populations made their demise by the Spaniards and later the English, French and Dutch, possible through slavery, diseases, and eventual death. The scattered groups that were able to escape capture remain relatively isolated, even today, in small traditional communities which can be found on the island of Dominica. Today the survival of these communities is under threat due to pressures from and integration into the dominant culture on the island.

Colonization and Exploitation (1605-1833): By the end of the seventeenth century colonization by the English, French and Dutch had spread throughout all the small islands of the Eastern Caribbean. The driving political and socio-economic pressures operating at that time were poor living conditions in Europe and the strife to emerge from the feudal system. This period heralded the introduction of new systems of government and land ownership, degradation of the environment, and change in the ethnic mix of populations. It was the beginning of a spiral of alternating periods of growth, ruin and recovery, migration and mass movement of peoples.

Despite the vagaries of diseases, droughts, hurricanes, wars, decline in soil productivity and crop output, and increasing competition from larger producers, the islands proved to be viable entities. West Indies trade in 18th century Bristol was worth twice as much as her other overseas commerce. One crop of sugar was estimated to have a value of up to £3 million (Williams, 1970). Huge benefits were provided to the absentee planter whose annual expenditure was estimated to be £50,000 (Watts, 1987 pg 352). There were scant efforts to develop the infrastructure and formal institutions in the colonies. The islands were thus drained of profits, which might have gone into further economic, agricultural and social development (Williams, 1970, pg 119).

At the turn of the 19th century a combination of international economic and political factors, and national social and environmental factors resulted in the decline and bankruptcy of the colonies, and the eventual abolition of slavery. These included the Napoleonic Wars and blockade of trade with the West Indies, discovery of beet sugar by German scientists, US position against the British beneficiaries of West Indian trade, competition with other colonies who offered sugar at lower prices, anti-slavery cause in Britain, declining soil productivity and limited capacity of the land, and slave revolts due

poor health and social conditions in the colonies. In short, conditions in the islands became increasingly vulnerable and precarious.

Emancipation and Migration (1834-1969): Abolition of slavery marked a pivotal point in the social and economic conditions of the Caribbean and set in motion a series of ripples from which the region is still striving to recover. The governing of the colonies shifted from the plantation owners to the British Government under the old representative system. While these political issues were unfolding, the major economic concern in the West Indies was the maintenance of the main revenue-earner, the sugar estate economy. The introduction of paid labour meant that freed slaves were able to use their wages to buy lands or buy out of the apprenticeship arrangement early. This gave rise to the initiation of the West Indian peasantry and present small farmers with marginal small plots of lands, usually in the mountains. Thus, the social and economic history of the Eastern Caribbean, especially the Windward Islands, has largely been that of an oppressed peasant proprietary class fighting to maintain its precarious existence within a hostile environment (Thomas, 1988).

Growing problems with labour shortages and augmented market competition, caused further decline in the economy of the islands. Planters and absentees withdrew their money and interests from the West Indies and re-migrated to the US, Canada, and South America where more fertile lands were available, and slavery was still in operation. Liberated Africans migrated to Europe and other regional countries in search of employment and opportunities to gain wealth. Indentured workers were imported from the Far East to meet labour shortages. Between 1838 and 1924 over ½ million Indians were brought to the West Indies. However, due to racial tensions with the dominant African population and the poor conditions of life in the Islands, immigration coincided with a wave of emigration (Williams, 1970).

These changes meant that the West Indies lost forever their position as key players in international trade and commerce, and had no voice in political and economic arena. In 1969, the Caribbean was noted as one of the very unstable places in the World (Williams, 1970 pg 498). Conditions operating in the region at that time included internal unrest, constitutional diversity, economic fragmentation, competition among individual territories, large-scale unemployment and underemployment, economic uncertainty, unresolved racial tensions, the restlessness of youth, and the all-pervading fear of the United States. These issues continued to be challenges to be overcome by Caribbean peoples for the remainder of the century and into the 21st century.

Vertical Integration and Fragmentation (1970 – present): The remainder of the 20th century was marked by independence from Britain and emergence into the international economy. While insertion into the international arena meant access to external structures and resources of more advanced nations, the relationship between the respective countries and the islands can be summarized as that of centre and periphery characteristic of relations between developed and developing countries. Earnest development and internal governance of the sub-region only began towards the end of the 20th century, after the move to independence. The resulting Eastern Caribbean can be described as follows:

Political System and Governance

Laws and regulations from the “home country” extended to all territories, and most of these institutions still govern relations within the OECS States with the Privy Council being the highest Court of appeal and the Queen as Head of State. The region has yet to define its own formal institutions based on the culture and norms that have evolved over the past four hundred years. There continues to be conflicts between formal and informal

institutions and organizations resulting in difficulty to enforce regulations, poor governance and underdevelopment. Current debates for and against the setting up of a Caribbean Court of Appeal to replace the role of the Privy Council is one example of the power that informal relations have on life in the region.

The impact of economic activities and globalisation

Caribbean peoples grow what they do not eat. A legacy of colonialism is the acquired foreign tastes for imported foods. The increasing importance of tourism further exacerbates the situation as annual tourism arrivals exceed the size of the resident populations. Food security is therefore of major concern, especially for poor disadvantaged groups. Added to that equation is the challenge to manage the large quantity of non-biodegradable solid waste generated on such small islands. Further, the beneficiaries of the tourist trade are foreign investors and interests.

Given the frequency, uncertainties and impacts of natural hazards, sugar cane and banana provided a source of economic resilience as production can usually be restored within one year. In the case of Grenada for example, the reliance on nutmegs is possible because of the low frequency of land-falling hurricanes. However, this income earner can be destroyed by one tropical cyclone and will take more than 10 years to recover. As 17th experiences with tobacco and the vagaries of hurricanes, drought, pests and diseases and competition from the State of Virginia prove, the colonists were able to find alternatives. Resilience was facilitated by integration into higher political and social systems at that time. In the face of present challenges can the OECS islands address the issue of food security and at the same time put strategies in place that will offer the same resilience to political and environmental threats? Should the islands struggle to retain the sentimental position of “global” producers of sugar cane and bananas despite the economic, environmental and social costs?

Race, Class and Social Cohesion

The destruction of Native Indian civilization, introduction of Europeans and Africans and their subsequent racial mixing, represents one of the most dramatic periods of mass migration of peoples and cultural changes in recent history. Social cohesion was seen as a destabilizing force and was not encouraged by colonists during slavery. Further the introduction of Indians, Chinese and other ethnic groups at the end of the nineteenth century created increased racial tension. Although the past one hundred years of racial mixing have reduced tensions, the emergence of new social classes based on educational and economic status have given rise to segregation and distinctive community types which can be found in each island. Consequently, there is a strong link between real estate values and the socio-economic status of communities and social networks are slowly disappearing.

Land Ownership

One of the legacies of the plantation-system was the designation of marginal lands on the periphery of the plantation for slave settlements. Most of these lands are on hilly terrain with shallow stony soils and low productivity, and are prone to landslides. Many free slaves were not able to own lands, while others were content to pay rent and continue living on estate lands or to work for the new landowner in exchange for free board. Several generations later, their descendents are still renting these marginal lands or are occupying them without any legal title. Foreign nationals having inherited or purchased them from colonial descendants, own much of the lands on islands. The perception of paradise has caused land prices to escalate making it difficult for Caribbean nationals to purchase property. As the poverty gap widens and development continues to be concentrated around the main cities, the incidence of squatting on marginal hazard prone state lands with no basic infrastructure is increasing.

Poverty and population demographics of the OECS States tend to be characteristic of pre-industrial societies. The age/class structure represents a bell shaped curve skewed to the left, peaking at 16% for the 10-14 years age range. Over fifty percent of the population are under the age of twenty-five. The region has a relatively small labour force, with an average of 33% of the population making up the working class. Literacy rates are high at 98% percent, but there are little opportunities for tertiary education (CDB, 2000). Coupled with shortage of opportunities for improvement in quality of life, migration rates from the region continue to be high. As represented by the level of education attained by the mass of the population, the Islands have limited human capital stock.

Recent poverty assessments estimate that between 25.1 and 37.5% of the population are poor, and in some Islands up to 25.7% are extremely poor or indigent. The poverty gap ranges from 6.1 to 9.9% and is highest in rural communities. The poor like the better off, live in their own dwellings but the poor are more likely to suffer low quality accommodation, inadequate potable water supply and toilet facilities. For example in one island up to 61.1% of rural poor own pit latrines and have no portable water (CDB, 2000). Migration rates are highest from these communities and in a recent survey 43.8% reported migration from their household. One benefit from migration is the remittances that are sent to support families, pay mortgages and purchase property. Remittances account for 6-9% of the GDP of the OECS States and may increase to as much as 15% after disaster events (UN-ECLAC, 1998). However, there is a steady erosion of social networks and traditional family care for the elderly as evidenced by the increase in nursing homes for the aged and need for support from the government. Also, there is concern that remittances serve as fuel for consumerism rather than investment into national-owned private sector organizations.

Environment and development planning

The constraints of mountainous terrain and small size of the islands, restrict settlements and development activities to low-lying coastal areas. Most of the forested interior is protected watersheds, and agriculture activities occupy lands in mid-elevations. Due to the short distances between the highest point and the coast, and the small gradients between ecosystem types, the impact of human activities on the environment are quickly manifested. Abandoned agricultural lands are rapidly being converted to residential and tourism development projects, reducing the habitat for many wildlife species. Coupled with poor development planning, there are increasing problems with watershed

management, wastewater disposal and treatment, and solid waste management. Flooding of low-lying areas due to poor storm water management and drainage is now a frequent occurrence after rain events. Mangroves, coral reefs and coastal habitats are under increasing pressure from land-generated wastes, fishing and tourist activities.

The patterns of development in the island Caribbean is atypical of many parts of the world, with social and economic activities concentrated around only one major city. A centrally planned government and no systems of local government foster this trend. Road networks are remnants of footpaths and poorly constructed tracks from the sugar plantation era. Although small, the time taken to travel around an island is relatively long, further encouraging growth of settlements close to the city centre. Rural communities are mainly developed around agriculture and fishing activities and contain the poor less advantaged groups. In Grenada for example between the periods 1995 to 2000, over US\$300 million was spent by the public and private sectors on development projects in and around the capital city (GOG, 2001). Rural development projects were limited to rehabilitation and maintenance of road networks, construction of dams and other infrastructure to facilitate the extraction of resources to the capital. The planning process is not participatory and with the decline of agriculture due to global pressures, further polarization between the centre and periphery is expected to occur.

Future Prospects for the region (policy responses)

At this crucial juncture, the OECS countries continue to be at the mercy of foreign aid and investors to meet the development challenges of the twenty-first century. The overall goal of the OECS proposed long-term development strategy is “to maximise the economic potential of the region in an effort to deliver high and sustainable growth, eradicate poverty and reduce unemployment and improve the general welfare of the population”. Regional cooperation is promoted as the solution for the Eastern Caribbean small Island States particularly in their decision-making and negotiations within international forums, formulation of policies for economic development, and environmental management.

This trend towards increased planning at the regional level means that international aid is increasingly being delivered as multilateral agreements, effectively reducing the level of support available for individual member states. In addition, model policies and plans developed at the regional level must be tailored by each state for implementation at the national level. Not only is there now a delay in translating recommendations into action at the national level, but also there is often a lack of fit between national needs, priorities and capacities, and regional goals and objectives.

Therefore, of secondary or maybe even greater importance is the need to translate these vulnerability assessments into national action proposals for reducing the internal pressures that increase their degree of exposure to external forces of change.

At the national level, the policy objectives promoted to achieve these goals in the short and medium term include: accelerated economic diversification through increase in agricultural output, expansion of tourism and increase manufacturing; increased levels of exports; building of human capacity through education; increased levels of private sector investments; improvement of the Public Sector Investment Program; privatisation of state-owned entities; commercialisation of some government services; civil service reform.

These responses seem consistent with the emphasis on national economic variables as indicators of vulnerability verses community level social vulnerability. As a result there are conflicts between strategies to achieve economic growth and long-term development. For example, the agriculture sector has been declining even under the support of

preferential trade regimes. Natural hazards, declining soil productivity, an aging labour force and reduced investment in the sector are not targeted in strategies to increase agricultural outputs. Further governments have yet to address the need to grow food for regional consumption. Also, there is no clear linkage between social, economic and environmental objectives.

Expansion of tourism is achieved by building larger hotels in coastal areas, conversion of fertile agricultural lands to golf courses, clearing of mangroves for boatyards and marinas, and securing air transport by paying international airlines exorbitant fees to maintain direct flights to the region. In light of an increase in the frequency and intensity of natural hazards in the region, and the growing threat of sea-level rise due to climate change, these projects serve to further heighten the precarious situation of the islands.

Private sector investment and privatisation of state owned entities is fuelled by foreign capital. To encourage foreign investment governments provide incentives such as economic citizenship and diplomatic status, duty-free concessions, tax holidays, and relaxation of labour and environmental regulations. While there is an accompanied increase in the quality and distribution of services due to privatisation, the profits from these entities are not reinvested into the development of other sectors. The burden of generating revenue for government operation and national development thus falls on the low-middle income classes. The projected short-term increase in jobs and revenues mask the long-term environmental degradation, increase in poverty, crime, violence and social tension that are likely to occur.

Case of Levera Estate Grenada

Levera Estate is located in the rural north of the island of Grenada. Covering an area of over 2000 acres, Levera Estate was an important sugar cane plantation. When the sugar cane industry declined in the early 1900s, the estate, which was owned by a single family, was abandoned. The freed slaves were allowed to rent individual plots of land to grow cash crops such as vegetables, yams and potatoes. Prompted by political changes and further decline in the local agricultural based economy, the family sold over 1000 acres of the estate, and migrated to Canada. However, the farmers were allowed to continue farming on the remaining land, and the family's lawyer collected rent. The land lease has been passed on through generations and maintained within families.

The coastal boundaries of the estate contain mangrove forests with a brackish water lake and long expanses of white sandy beaches. Two species of endangered turtles nests on the beach, and migratory and endangered birds visit the mangrove swamp. Near shore coral reefs are abundant in fish, and both locals and tourists exploit many popular dive sites. This abundance of pristine natural resources prompted the government to declare the area a national park, in 1985. However, land ownership remained with the original family and with financial assistance from the European Union the government developed the area with nature trails, interpretation centre with bathrooms, benches and picnic areas. User fees are not collected from visitors and it is has become increasingly difficult for the Forestry and Parks Department to manage the area.

Until 1996, farmers were still paying rent for using the land, however, ownership changed as remaining portions of the land were sold to foreign nationals. Encouraged by increasing growth in tourism and government incentives for development of the sector, a private investment group from North America bought all the lands in the area and construction of a hotel resort on the coastal front of the estate began in 2001. The all inclusive resort will include 225 hotel rooms, a conference centre, 18 hole golf course,

tennis courts, gym and recreation centre, spa and oasis, restaurants and bar. To facilitate the project, a large area of mangrove forests has been cleared, and transformation of the landscape has begun. In addition to the removal of natural coastal sea defences and wildlife habitat, wastewater pollution will pose a serious threat to marine life. Levera is located in a low rainfall region, therefore a river will be dammed and water piped to the project. The river has a small watershed and the agricultural communities who depend on that water source will be severely affected.

Most of the farmers are over the age of forty, have limited education and will not be able to transit into the tourism industry. However, the government sees the project as a catalyst for rural development and there are plans to rehabilitate roads, expand and upgrade utilities in the area. No assistance was provided to the farmers to find alternative lands or to transit into other jobs, although it is proposed that the project will generate 400 direct jobs and the local community will be able to sell their produce to the resort. The life and local culture has changed from one of independence and self-sufficiency to dependence. Social cohesion has been reduced as people migrate from the community in search of employment opportunities.

Approval of the development project was not subject to an environmental impact assessment (EIA) or an economic cost-benefit analysis, for which the Government of Grenada has yet to adopted the model OECS legislation. Residents of the surrounding communities have voiced their concerns on the environmental impacts of the project in the local media but failed to create any significant influence on government or the developers. Despite the fact that members of the community were able to maintain a subsistence lifestyle for several generations, their security was easily eroded since they had no property rights. The community showed weak horizontal integration, as it was not linked to local networks, such as the farmers association or the local NGO Agency for Rural Transformation (ART), who have been successful at putting local issues on the national agenda. Except for external family ties the community had very little connections to larger political structures to obtain assistance for their transition. At the national level, the opportunity to utilize regional and international resources to develop formal institutions for natural resources management and development planning were not captured. There continue to be conflicts between formal organizations and informal institutions resulting in poor governance and unsustainable development.

Conclusions

Given the preceding discussions, there seems to be a mismatch between the development objectives of governments and the realities of everyday life. The above case demonstrates that to be effective vulnerability reduction strategies must be integrated from the bottom-up. Community networks must be strengthened and assistance should be provided to farmers to secure property rights and legal title for lands. This will help to stem the rural-urban exodus, increase the level of investment in agriculture, increase social security and build local capacity. The policies of governments and financial institutions suggest that their risk-perception favour tourism projects over small-scale community agriculture development projects. Governments have dismissed the role of subsistence farmers in national development as being insignificant. Their contribution to maintaining social security and resilience in rural communities needs to be examined.

Rural development should be placed on the agenda of national and regional organizations, since growth continues to be focused around capital cities in all islands. More emphasis must be placed on developing formal institutions for the management of the development process in the OECS. However, people must be involved in the

decision-making process, as the interaction of formal and informal institutions continues to create conflicts. The main challenge for the region into the 21st century will be to attract investments that will maintain national economic growth yet provide social benefits at local levels, and protect the environment in the process.

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