
Embracing Transformational Vision That Emphasizes Data Collection and Monitoring and Evaluation to Inform, Improve, and Shape Decision-Making in the Caribbean Region

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Background: With a population of roughly 44.5 million people and a land mass size of approximately 240,000 square kilometers, the Caribbean boasts stunning beauty and all-year tropical weather. The region faces many developmental challenges caused by small country size, limited financial resources, and acute vulnerability to numerous climate-induced and other geological events that continuously impede and derail developmental progress. Like other countries globally, the region also needs to become more resilient and sustainable. However, policy- and decision-making are often done in isolation from sufficiently disaggregated data and monitoring and evaluation, critical tools to inform sound policy-making.

Purpose: I share some thoughts on the type of vision needed to guide the Caribbean's quest for economic development, resilience, and prosperity. I propose that this vision cannot be achieved unless the Caribbean public sector values and places increasing emphasis on data collection and monitoring and evaluation.

Keywords: *accountability; challenges; data; development; evaluation; learning; monitoring; resilience; sustainability; transformational vision*

Setting: Caribbean public sector.

Intervention: Not applicable.

Research Design: Not applicable.

Data Collection and Analysis: Desk review.

Findings: Economic development, resilience, and prosperity are heavily dependent on credible data and monitoring and evaluation to inform sense-making. The Caribbean public sector therefore needs to view data quite differently, essentially as the lifeblood of decision-making. Monitoring and evaluation must also be capitalized upon, since this can aid learning and provide greater accountability and transparency. At this time, the Caribbean would benefit from reevaluating its vision for regional development.

The Caribbean region is considered as a major tourism hub, as tourism contributed approximately US\$60 billion to the region's gross development product in 2022 (López, 2024). This tropical paradise registered approximately 28 million tourist arrivals in 2022, a decrease of approximately 12% from 2019 (Walters, 2023). The region faces many development challenges, including limited financial resources, which were worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic. The region's financial challenges have impacted national statistical systems upkeep, the amount and volume of disaggregated data that is captured, and the amount of real-time evidence-based data that is collected—important ingredients to support and inform decision-making. The region has also not yet embraced a culture of Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E), important tools to inform policy-making (Persaud & Dagher, 2023). In 2019, the Caribbean Community and Common Market Secretariat (whose mission is to promote economic integration and cooperation) initiated a results-based monitoring (RBM) framework. However, as of 2025, this pilot project is lagging (Shepherd et al., in press). Countries in the Caribbean are all signatories to the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and are committed to working toward realizing this manifesto. Agenda 2030 is a global action plan to end hunger and poverty, combat inequalities, promote peace and justice, and preserve planet Earth. However, the agenda has been considerably derailed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The volume and frequency of climate-induced events such as hurricanes and heavy rains, along with sporadic events such as volcanic eruptions and earthquakes, are also placing a heavy toll on the region's economic developmental efforts, often destroying major road infrastructure, houses, and food security, and adversely impacting tourism. These challenges constantly necessitate that limited financial resources be diverted to short-term emergency response measures to get countries back to some semblance of normalcy (Persaud & Dagher, 2023).

This paper will share why it is important for the Caribbean to embrace a different philosophy to development planning, one that incorporates disaggregated evidence-based data, development of an M&E culture, and a more holistic and proactive approach to inform and shape strategic planning. This integrated approach is proffered to help the region to better cope with its myriad challenges and to develop greater resilience and sustainability. The paper is divided into two sections. The first provides background and context on the Caribbean region. Specifically, this section shares some demographics on the region, highlights events

during the last 5 years that have negatively impacted the region's economic and social development, summarizes the status of M&E in the region and what is being done to promote M&E in the region, and explains how tardy and insufficient data collection is impeding the region's developmental progress. The second section shares some thoughts on the road map needed for transformational change in the Caribbean region, a vision that must incorporate credible data systems and regular M&E.

Background and Context

Demographics of the Caribbean Region

The Caribbean region comprises a land mass size of approximately 240,000 square kilometers (Worldatlas, n.d.), with a combined population of roughly 44.5 million people (Worldometer, 2025). Countries in this region are relatively low-lying, which makes them acutely vulnerable to climate-induced events (Global Affairs Canada, 2018). This archipelago of countries boasts stunning beauty and tropical all-year weather. The region is characterized by vibrant cultural diversity and ethnicities shaped largely by European colonialism and slavery (Persaud, 2019; Persaud & Dagher, 2020). Five predominant languages (Creole, Dutch, English, French, and Spanish) are spoken in the region (Library of Congress, n.d.). Countries in the Caribbean are tied together by several commonalities, including a British colonial heritage and a Westminster model of governance with the traditional structure of a cabinet and prime minister who formulate legislation (Persaud, 2019; Quinn, n.d.). The majority of Caribbean countries have now obtained independence from Britain (Deebrah, 2024), and a few have completely exited the monarchy (Yang, 2022). The region's political landscape is relatively peaceful (Global Affairs Canada, 2018). Income in the Caribbean is primarily derived from commodity exports and service industries (Global Affairs Canada, 2018). A number of important regional partnerships have been established to facilitate cooperation and policy dialogue, including the Caribbean Community and Common Market, and the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (Baptiste et al., 2019; Persaud & Dagher, 2023). However, regional integration has not taken place, and countries maintain individual sovereignty (Global Affairs Canada, 2018).

Major Shocks Impacting the Caribbean's Economic and Social Development Efforts, 2020–2024

COVID-19 exacerbated the fragility of the socioeconomic fabric of the Caribbean region (Byron et al., 2021), devastating country economies and placing considerable burden on the limited financial resources in each country (Persaud, in press). The pandemic eroded decades of economic development at the country level (United Nations, 2020) and also derailed progress toward the United Nations sustainable development goals (United Nations, 2021). Climate and geologically induced events also intensified the region's quandary. For example, the eruption of the volcano La Soufrière in St. Vincent and the Grenadines which occurred in December 2020 wreaked havoc on that country as the nation tried to cope simultaneously with the pandemic and a major volcanic eruption. Governments and residents of neighboring countries also incurred additional financial hardship for cleanup necessitated by airborne volcanic ash (Robertson et al., 2023). A 7.2-magnitude earthquake in Haiti in August 2021, along with floods and further earthquakes in 2023 (United Nations, 2023), crippled Haiti's economy in unprecedented ways. The passage of Hurricane Beryl in 2024 again devastated St. Vincent and the Grenadines, along with Grenada, and Jamaica (International Organization for Migration, 2024). It also caused serious damage in other Caribbean islands, such as Barbados and St. Lucia. Post-COVID-19, many Caribbean governments were confronted with rising country indebtedness (Arteaga et al., 2020). The culmination of the aforementioned events stressed the region's financial resources and eroded the personal savings of a majority of the region's populace, pushing many Caribbean citizens back into poverty. Gross domestic product is trending downward in many Caribbean countries, and inflation is on the rise (World Bank, 2023). This has resulted in more restrictive monetary policies. Public expenditure is anticipated to contract, with resultant impacts on fiscal policy, development, and growth in the region (United Nations, 2022). The region's economic woes will also likely worsen as a result of foreign policy changes taking place in the United States under the newly elected Trump administration—particularly its imposition of tariffs, which is currently escalating global tariff wars (Mason et al., 2025) and will impact the Caribbean directly and indirectly.

Status of M&E in the Caribbean Region

During the last decade, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) has been gaining some momentum in the Caribbean region. Notwithstanding, the Caribbean as a whole has not yet embraced an M&E culture (Persaud, in press; Shepherd et al., in press). Monitoring and evaluation are two distinct epistemological approaches: **Monitoring** involves tracking an intervention's planned performance against predetermined measures (Shepherd et al., in press) and is closely aligned with compliance reporting (Goldman et al., 2021). In contrast, **evaluation** assesses the extent to which programs have achieved expected outcomes (Shepherd et al., in press). It is the systematic determination of merit, worth, and significance of the evaluand (Scriven, 1991) and is linked to learning and the assessment and strengthening of the evaluand's performance (Goldman et al., 2021).

There are a number of factors hindering the development of an M&E culture in the Caribbean. First and foremost are limited financial resources. Caribbean countries are small, with tiny public-sector staff complements. Additionally, Caribbean countries are particularly vulnerable to climate- and nature-induced events that require constant diversion of substantial financial resources on an annual basis to deal with various crises. Consequently, M&E, which requires financial and human capacity resources, has not been a priority for the Caribbean region. Second, Caribbean economies are largely open and undiversified. This, coupled with high public debt, exacerbates the region's financial woes and places limits and restrictions on what can be done, especially when structural adjustment programs are imposed by the International Monetary Fund. Third, evaluations conducted to date have been primarily for accountability purposes, mostly donor driven, and largely performed using external, international, Western evaluators who are not attuned and sensitive to the region's unique nuances. Consequently, evaluations are largely perceived as something that benefits external actors, with little benefit for the local country. Fourth, various attempts at public sector reform have not been very successful, due to lack of political commitment and resistance to change (Persaud & Dagher, 2023). Finally, the region's national statistical systems are quite inadequate (Bourne et al., 2015). Consequently, very limited M&E has been performed outside of donor requirements, since M&E is heavily dependent on high-quality data and financial resources to drive the process.

In light of the aforementioned, M&E is still a relatively low-key activity in the region (Baptiste et al., 2019; Persaud & Dagher, 2023). Nonetheless, various efforts and activities have been taking place to promote M&E in the Caribbean (Persaud, 2023). One important initiative has been the establishment of Caribbean Evaluators International to promote evaluation practice in the region via thought leadership, peer learning, and professional development. Additionally, in Barbados and Jamaica, voluntary organizations for professional evaluation were also established. It should be noted, however, that the Barbados association is not very active. Another important initiative is the work being performed by the Caribbean Community and Common Market Secretariat to promote M&E in the region. Since 2012, this regional body has been assiduously working to move concept to reality. In January 2019, an RBM initiative was endorsed by Caribbean countries, with the aim of fostering a results-oriented community (Persaud, 2023). Its justification was premised on low rates of successful project implementation, weaknesses in achieving program objectives, poor implementation of public policies, and implementation deficits (Joseph-Charles, 2023). In 2023, the Secretariat facilitated a regional webinar to promote monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and learning (MEAL) in the Caribbean community. Prior to the Secretariat's RBM initiative, Trinidad and Tobago legislated an M&E policy in 2015. Jamaica's long-term national development plan (2009–2030) also promotes RBM and integrated evidence (Persaud, 2023).

Other initiatives which have also been instrumental in helping to promote an M&E culture in the Caribbean include the establishment of committees to govern accountability and transparency at the country level, public dialogue, scholarship, and training. Specifically, most countries in the region now have public accounts committees. However, they are at various stages of maturity, which impacts practices and effectiveness. Many countries in the region also now have national audit standards. M&E is also being promoted by a small group of regional practitioners and academics through various media. During the last 5 years, several regional organizations have partnered and organized panel

discussions during the annual Glocal week of activities. Unfortunately, these panel discussions generally attract only a small group (25–40 people, and usually the same people each time). Caribbean Evaluators International also actively promoted M&E via their semi-annual newsletter *Caribbean EvalChat*. However, in 2021, the newsletter was discontinued due to financial and human capacity constraints. A few people have also been actively engaged in M&E scholarship in a bid to generate buy-in and promote M&E in the region. Finally, the University of the West Indies' Barbados campus has been offering a MSc in project management and evaluation since 2000. In 2024, the Jamaica campus, in collaboration with Caribbean Evaluators International and Baastel, Canada, also piloted a short training course on RBM (Persaud, 2023), which attracted 23 regional participants.

In summary, a number of useful initiatives have been taking place in the Caribbean to promote an M&E culture, including formation of three voluntary organizations for professional evaluation, along with collaboration of several regional institutions and individuals to stimulate and promote dialogue on M&E. However, as of 2025, only one country has M&E legislation, and M&E remains largely underutilized in the region.

Data Deficiencies in the Caribbean and Their Impact on Progress Toward the Sustainable Development Goals

The United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was endorsed by 193 countries globally, and all Caribbean countries are signatories to this agenda. However, the agenda is seriously off-track and in peril (Sachs et al., 2023). Globally, only 17% of the goals are on track, and over one third have regressed and/or stalled (United Nations, 2024). COVID-19 severely derailed and scarred the agenda (Yuan et al., 2023). Additionally, increasing global geopolitical tensions and conflicts are undermining the agenda, and more than 120 million people worldwide have now forcibly been displaced. Climate chaos and biodiversity loss are also worsening the agenda's predicament, and inequity gaps are widening (United Nations, 2024).

Table 1. Progress Made on the SDGs by Caribbean Countries

	No poverty	Zero hunger	Good health and well-	Quality education	Gender equity	Clean water and	Affordable and clean	Decent work and	Industry, innovation and	Reduced inequities	Sustainable cities and	Responsible consumption	Climate action	Life below water	Life on land	Peace, justice, and strong	Partnerships for the goals
SDG Goal Number	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
Antigua & Barbuda	⑤	④	②	①	③	③	④	⑤	③	⑤	②	⑤	②	④	③	③	③
Bahamas, the	⑤	④	③	④	③	③	③	③	③	⑤	①	③	④	④	④	④	③
Barbados	⑤	④	③	②	③	④	③	⑤	③	⑤	②	⑤	③	④	③	④	②
Belize ^a	④	④	④	④	③	③	③	④	③	⑤	③	②	②	④	④	④	③
Cuba	⑤	③	③	②	②	③	②	②	④	⑤	③	①	①	④	④	⑤	②
Dominica	⑤	④	④	②	②	③	③	⑤	③	⑤	⑤	⑤	②	④	④	④	③
Dominican Republic	②	⑤	④	③	②	③	③	③	③	③	②	②	②	③	③	④	③
Grenada	⑤	④	③	③	②	③	③	⑤	③	④	⑤	⑤	②	④	④	③	③
Guyana ^a	②	④	④	③	③	③	④	③	③	⑤	③	⑤	④	④	②	④	③
Haiti	④	④	④	⑤	④	④	④	④	④	④	④	①	①	④	④	④	④
Jamaica	②	④	③	②	②	④	③	③	③	④	②	③	②	④	④	④	②
St. Kitts & Nevis	⑤	④	④	①	②	③	③	⑤	③	⑤	②	⑤	②	④	④	④	③
St. Lucia	③	④	③	②	③	③	③	⑤	③	④	②	⑤	②	④	④	④	③
St. Vincent & the Grenadines	⑤	③	③	①	②	③	③	⑤	③	⑤	⑤	⑤	②	③	④	④	③
Suriname ^a	①	③	③	③	③	③	③	⑤	③	⑤	③	⑤	②	②	④	④	③
Trinidad & Tobago	①	④	③	③	③	③	④	③	③	⑤	③	⑤	③	④	④	④	③
SDG Goal Number	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17

Note. ① = SDG Achieved; ② = Challenges Remain; ③ = Significant Challenges; ④ = Major Challenges; ⑤ = Data Not Available.

Adapted from *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2024* (<https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2024/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2024.pdf>).

^a Belize, Guyana, and Suriname are technically part of South America but are usually associated with the Caribbean due to their political and cultural ties with the region.

In the Caribbean, Agenda 2030 is being impacted by data collection deficits in many countries (United Nations, 2024) and M&E deficits (Persaud & Dagher, 2023). As can be observed from

Table 1, data unavailability is a serious concern, particularly on Goal 1—No Poverty, Goal 8—Decent Work and Economic Growth, Goal 10—Reduced Inequalities, and Goal 12—Responsible

Consumption and Production. In general, most Caribbean countries are experiencing significant or major challenges with respect to the achievement of most of the sustainable development goals, and only a few countries have achieved one or two goals out of the 17.

The Caribbean's data collection deficits are not, however, a new phenomenon. Bourne et al. (2015) noted that "the capacity of national statistical systems is woefully inadequate in most Caribbean SIDS..." creating "a critical weakness in national and corporate planning for progress" (p. 49). The World Bank Group (2024) expressed similar sentiments, noting that "many Caribbean countries struggle with weak statistical capacity and low data usage" (para. 1). According to the World Bank Group, the Caribbean ranks "lowest in statistical performance compared to other regions" (para. 1), and this has directly impacted tracking of the sustainable development goals. Compounding the problem with data deficits is a silo attitude and a general reluctance to share data, resulting in "duplication and triplication of activities without achieving the desired results" (Soeknandan, 2021, p. 2), which creates inefficiencies and results in unexplored interlinkages (Persaud, in press). Whether this attitude reflects mistrust fueled in part by the region's colonial past or some other reason is hard to pinpoint. What is clear is that silo behavior is very noticeable in the region and, coupled with data deficits, is creating serious impediments to informed decision-making (Persaud & Dagher, 2023).

The Road Map Needed for Transformational Change in the Caribbean Region

Addressing Data Deficits: The Importance of Real-Time, Evidence-Based, Sufficiently Disaggregated Data to Inform and Shape Policy and Decision-Making

Regardless of whether public decision-making is being utilized for strategic public policies geared to national economic development or whether it is necessitated to address crisis situations caused by global or national issues such as political instability, wars, natural disasters, health emergencies, and so on, effective decision-making cannot be done in isolation from credible and timely data. To effectively identify challenges and measure impact, high-quality data is critical to provide "the right

information on the right things at the right time" (Independent Expert Advisory Group, 2014, p. 2).

As highlighted in the Background and Context section, the Caribbean region faces myriad challenges in its quest for economic development, growth, and prosperity. Countries in the Caribbean are committed to working toward the sustainable development goals laid out in Agenda 2030, an important global initiative that must be incorporated into the region's strategic vision and planning. However, regional development in the Caribbean has always been challenged by small size and inadequate financial resources. The region's financial woes have also been considerably exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and other nature-induced events. Limited financial resources are a serious impediment currently affecting the region's ability to collect real-time, evidence-based, sufficiently disaggregated data. As in other parts of the world, these three data components are very important to support and inform sound public policy formulation and decision-making in the Caribbean.

Real-time data (i.e., data collected instantly to specifically address some type of urgent crisis) is quite essential for the Caribbean, given its vulnerability to various climate- and nature-induced events. These events generally cripple Caribbean countries overnight and require urgent action on the part of governments to get countries up and running and to get aid to those injured and/or most vulnerable. In addition to real-time data, policy and decision-making would also benefit from greater reliance on more evidence-based data—that is, data based on research and facts, not opinions or assumptions. To complement real-time and evidence-based data, data also needs to be sufficiently disaggregated, since aggregated data can mask disparities, trends, and so on. Specifically, disaggregated data is important for fostering enhanced understanding of problems and will permit more effective and targeted interventions that can optimize the region's limited financial resources. Such data will also be insightful for dealing with immediate emergency situations and is also particularly useful for medium-to-long-term planning. For instance, strategies aimed at advancing the sustainable development goals agenda in the Caribbean cannot be done in isolation from disaggregated data, since this agenda must address the specific needs of different groups to level the playing field and promote equity, inclusiveness, and a basic standard of living for all.

As the Caribbean recalibrates its developmental agenda, credible real-time, evidence-based, sufficiently disaggregated

developmental data is absolutely critical to inform and shape strategic vision (Persaud & Dagher, 2021a) so that no one is left behind (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2017). Policies must focus on eliminating basic poverty (Persaud & Dagher, 2021b) and on reducing inequities and building greater resilience and sustainability. However, as Table 1 highlights, many countries in the Caribbean have no statistics on the extent of poverty at the country level, and the majority have no statistics on the extent of existing inequities. Evidence-based data is absolutely important to ensure that certain groups are not excluded from decision-making (Persaud & Dagher, 2021b). Properly disaggregated data that shows variances between groups must form the “lifblood of decision-making ... the raw material for accountability” (Independent Expert Advisory Group, 2014, p. 2) so that decision-making in the Caribbean is not simply based on “wholly subjective assessment, opinion, or stakeholder influencing” (Parsons, 2017, p. 7). Policymakers must recognize that data and decision-making are intricately intertwined (Persaud & Dagher, 2021a) and credible data is a fundamental ingredient of the complex mosaic of decision-making (Persaud, 2021). If the Caribbean region is to make meaningful progress on the sustainable development goals, data must become the bedrock for understanding the “practicalities of the development process, the interactions and feedback between different systems and the factors that should shape decisions” (Haynes, 2017, p. 9). Failure on the part of regional leaders to address data deficits will lead to developmental challenges not being properly addressed—a situation that does not augur well for the region’s development, progress, and growth.

Embedding M&E into Caribbean Public Sector Culture

Worldwide, public sector inefficiencies are an ongoing concern in both developed and developing countries (Fourie & Poggenpoe, 2017). Over the decades, public sector institutions everywhere have tried various reforms to address concerns with lack of accountability, poor service delivery, poor performance management, and so on (Lufunyo, 2013), including M&E (Ojok, 2016). Early M&E focus was primarily on data collection geared at donor reporting. However, the role of M&E has significantly evolved, and today M&E is not only concerned with what is done, but also with whether meaningful impact has been derived (EvalCommunity, n.d.). In response to the evolving

nature of M&E, various monikers for M&E have been coined, expressing different levels of emphasis within the broader M&E framework. Popular terms include MEAL; RBM; monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL); results-based monitoring and evaluation (RBM&E); and monitoring, evaluation, research, and learning (MERL).

As highlighted in the first section of this paper, M&E is still a relatively low-key activity in the Caribbean (Persaud & Dagher, 2020). This is quite unsatisfactory, since public sector inefficiencies are quite visible in the Caribbean region and the M&E toolkit can provide useful tools that can assist with addressing these issues. Lack of transparency and accountability (MacDonald, 2021), implementation paralysis (Caribbean Center for Development Administration, 2024), poor project implementation (Ram et al., 2017), and poor service delivery (Caribbean Development Bank, 2017), along with other types of inefficiencies, are common across the Caribbean public sector. Additionally, critical decisions are often made in the absence of M&E data (Persaud, in press), and lack of political will has been flagged as a major impediment to developmental planning in the region (Caribbean Development Bank, 2017).

In response, the Caribbean Community and Common Market Secretariat has been diligently promoting M&E in the region. However, it should be noted that scant information is available to gauge the progress of its RBM pilot initiative, which was institutionalized in 2019. The Secretariat’s webinar on June 14, 2023, to promote MEAL also appears to have created additional confusion, as evidenced by the types of questions posed by participants. For example, one participant asked “Are we migrating from RBM to MEAL, or is MEAL a tool as part of the RBM paradigm? AND, are we migrating from M&E to MEAL or is MEAL an enhancement of M&E?” The response: “Yes, MEAL is a tool as part of the RBM paradigm, and we are migrating from M&E to MEAL which is an enhancement of M&E with the added components of accountability and learning” (Webinar participant and H. Joseph-Charles, unrecorded webinar, June 14, 2023).

So, what are the implications of trying to advance a MEAL culture in the Caribbean, and is the timing appropriate, given that RBM to encourage a results-oriented Caribbean community is still very much in its infancy? To answer this question, it is important to understand what these three management tools seek to accomplish. As Figure 1 indicates, monitoring is concerned with tracking progress, while evaluation is concerned with providing a value judgment. Although not explicit in its definition, a properly designed M&E

system facilitates accountability and learning (Persaud & Dagher, 2021a). Practically, accountability evokes evaluation and vice versa. Evaluation serves many purposes, and accountability is one of them (Portela, 2012). Still, “accountability” is a rather nebulous term. Although it is frequently interpreted as a characteristic of contemporary democratic governance (Dubnick & Yang, 2011), which usually translates to transparency and holding management to account, in the context of evaluation, accountability can be interpreted in many different ways, and the level of accountability can also vary. For instance, accountability in evaluation often examines what has been accomplished with the funds received (Mayne, 2007); that is, it facilitates accountability to the funder. If done properly, evaluation can also assess accountability of program staff (Persaud & Dagher, 2021a). However, in contexts where evaluation is not well established, this aspect of accountability is usually ignored, since it does little to endear evaluation, even when evaluators are careful to emphasize learning rather than attribute blame. Since evaluation is still a relatively low-key activity in the Caribbean, holding implementing agencies and program staff accountable for program outcomes (the intention of the accountability component of MEAL) is not the norm, since the Caribbean public sector has not as yet embraced a culture for M&E. Currently, many top Caribbean public sector officials tend to be quite averse to criticism of any nature, especially criticism from outsiders. Additionally, since there is often a perception that outsiders do not understand the nuances of the region and make no attempt to be sensitive to these issues, this frequently results in pushback to outside criticism. Thus, evaluations that have taken place in the region have generally focused on the results framework and on what has been accomplished with the financial resources obtained (Persaud & Dagher, 2020).

In contrast, RBM examines the stewardship of senior management as it pertains to compliance “with government-wide performance and accountability standards” (Global Affairs Canada, 2022, p. 9). Like M&E, learning and accountability are also elements of this paradigm. M&E is also an important component of an RBM framework, although it is not explicitly highlighted by the acronym. As previously mentioned, placing direct onus on management for the delivery of results is new to the Caribbean public sector culture. Although management accountability is obviously implied in Caribbean public sector governance, in reality, there have been little or no consequences when senior public officials have exhibited poor

performance. The media may air something negative; however, in general, it is business as usual for the people involved. Embracing RBM will thus require cultural adaptation. Proper incentives may therefore be warranted to act as motivators. However, since the institutionalization of RBM is still in its infancy in the Caribbean region, the effectiveness of this management tool has not yet been put to the test.

In terms of learning, this can evolve from either M&E or RBM. However, the manner in which evaluations have been designed and conducted in the region has not really done much to garner buy-in and trust of the process by the Caribbean public sector. As such, learning is rarely utilized by regional stakeholders, since many see the evaluation process as simply fulfilling a conditionality of external financing—an activity that caters to the interest of the funder (Persaud & Dagher, 2020). Additionally, the perception that international evaluators do not understand and are not sensitive to the nuances of the region limits ownership and buy-in to the process. Since RBM is still in its pilot phase in the Caribbean, it cannot be determined at this time whether learning will be utilized and the extent to which it will be used.

The transition to MEAL, which is now being promoted by the Caribbean Community and Common Market Secretariat, essentially pulls out the accountability and learning components that are embedded in both M&E and RBM. This permits conscious and direct focus on accountability and learning, two ingredients that are critical for project success. Utilization of this framework would place the onus on management for program outcomes, thus holding management directly accountable by its own policy framework.

So, is the promotion of varied nomenclature related to M&E by the Caribbean Community and Common Market Secretariat a good strategic move? Perhaps not at this time! Although many of these terms have been embraced by several developed countries globally, all nomenclature has been at the mercy of (inter alia) inadequate budgets; the nature of the relationships among country governments and partners with specific agendas (Persaud & Dagher, 2020); hasty planning, implementation, and reporting; different interpretations of fundamental concepts among public officials (Sheppard et al., in press); inadequate and insufficient technical expertise to anchor systems; bad data; pushback fueled by organizational culture and politics (Gervais, 2022); stakeholder relationships marred by lack of trust; and cultural insensitivity (Persaud & Dagher, 2020).

Thus, if we accept that the denoted long-standing issues have appeared under many—if not

most—M&E systems, and we also acknowledge that public sector inefficiency and mediocre performance are still quite visible everywhere (even in developed countries), then irrespective of the framework being utilized, M&E would be compromised unless the aforementioned illustrative constituents were adequately addressed. This is not to suggest that M&E frameworks are useless. Rather, it is more the case that M&E, whatever name it may go by, has been victim to one or more of the aforementioned problems.

Specifically, there are inherent challenges in attempting to change organizational behavior. Culture represents a way of thinking that is embedded in a foundational set of attitudes, beliefs, norms, perceptions values, and underlying assumptions (Goldman et al., 2021) that guide actions and behaviors of organizational members and how they interact within the organization (Bogade & Debela, 2024). According to Mayne (2010), although many organizations commit to an M&E culture in principle, in reality, not much is done to actively foster and build such a culture—an enterprise that requires a great deal of commitment and effort. Building an organizational M&E culture necessitates at a minimum senior management walking the talk, institutionalizing the policy (Mayne, 2010), and ensuring that the process is supported by adequate financial and human resources to anchor and sustain the system (Persaud, 2024).

At this juncture, it would probably be advisable for the Caribbean Community and Common Market Secretariat to focus on helping countries to properly understand and become familiar with existing protocols, rather than trying to promote and inculcate another framework. Getting it right is important. However, given that there are many similarities among the myriad names for M&E, swinging like a pendulum could actually subvert efforts at adopting a seemingly improved process and an aspirational higher standard and quality of evaluation. The proposal to advance MEAL may therefore be premature and perhaps unnecessary at this time.

The Caribbean is confronted with serious human capacity constraints, insufficient technical skills, and lack of financial resources. Promoting a new M&E framework whilst another is still in its pilot phase may likely create more confusion and frustrate the process of cultivating an M&E culture.

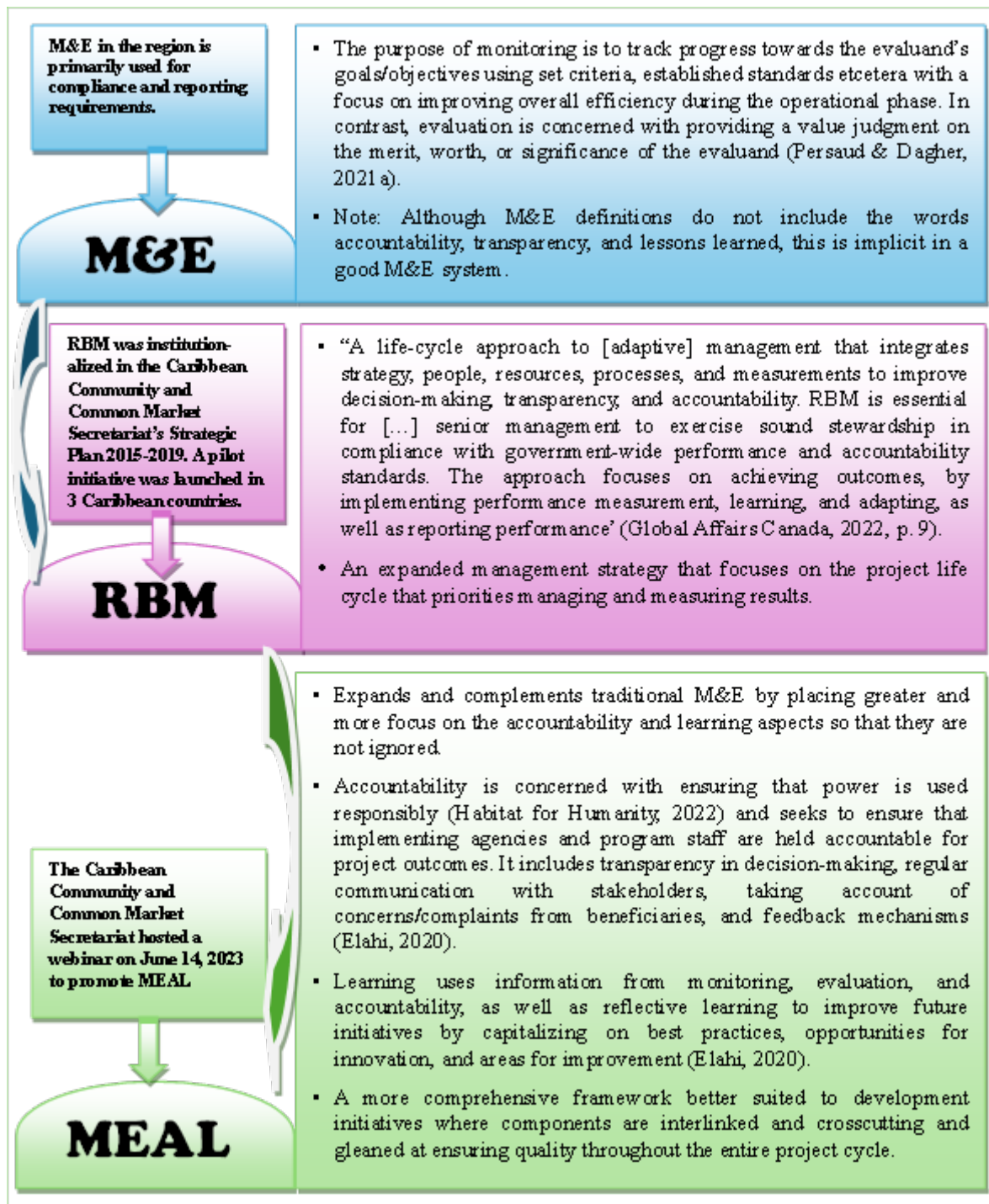
Regardless of the M&E framework utilized, success is largely dependent on the framework being aligned with other initiatives (Naidoo, 2022), such as country governments budgeting sufficient financial resources to conduct M&E, effective utilization of tools which require technical training and capacity development, institutionalization of the process, political will to anchor and drive the process, and creation of an enabling environment with necessary infrastructure, support systems, and incentive mechanisms to motivate public officials to execute their duties and use M&E.

It is inevitable that improvements in processes and understanding will continue to evolve, along with new terminology and acronymic permutations. However, history clearly shows that planning and execution of M&E under extant, revised, or improved systems is not foolproof. All M&E frameworks can encounter potential problems due to procedural weaknesses or ambiguous application. Additionally, it must be acknowledged that social, cultural, ethnobureaucratic, and economic deficiencies are recurrent. Therefore, it is unlikely that any M&E framework will function flawlessly. Accordingly, the Caribbean does not need to swing like a pendulum when it comes to M&E. Instead, the region simply needs an M&E system that works well.

Making the Caribbean More Resilient and Sustainable

As aforementioned, the Caribbean faces multiple challenges that are wreaking havoc on its efforts at achieving prosperity and economic progress. The region's development is constantly being eroded by events beyond its control, such as hurricanes and other nature-induced events. Such events are a regular occurrence in the Caribbean region and place considerable domestic pressure on country governments, who regularly need to divert scarce financial resources to constantly cope with various emergency response measures. The region's strategic planning must incorporate mechanisms to build greater resilience and sustainability to withstand climate-induced and other shocks. Additionally, since Caribbean countries are all signatories to the sustainable development goals agenda, this agenda must also be integrated into its strategic framework.

Figure 1. Evolution of M&E Frameworks in the Caribbean



At this time, Caribbean governments have an opportunity to reevaluate their strategy and vision for the region. If the region is serious about becoming more resilient, a different approach to developmental planning is needed. This approach

requires a more transformational approach to development planning—one that is sufficiently proactive and holistic to transcend beyond the short and medium term. Such a strategy requires stronger and more partnerships among regional

governments; substantially more public–private initiatives; a culture of delivery; diversification from heavy dependency on agriculture and tourism (since these industries are constantly affected by nature- and climate-induced events); incentives to assist homeowners to bring their homes up to an acceptable and minimum hurricane standard (e.g., home improvement loans with low interest rates, income tax incentives for homeowners who make their homes more hurricane resistant); policies to ensure that all citizens can enjoy a basic standard of living; education to ensure the region’s populace understands why it is important for all citizens to play a role in being more proactive, rather than simply relying on assistance from government after a crisis; and so on. COVID-19 has provided valuable lessons, an opportunity for reflection, and a chance to collaborate and design a new pathway that is considerably more resilient and sustainable.

Transformational vision is, however, understandably complicated. Such vision requires thoughtful and deep reflection on how the public sector is currently operated; movement away from the traditional public sector *modus operandi*; proper conceptualization of the interlinkages among various developmental initiatives and how they contribute to the overall big-picture vision; logical and structured prioritization of developmental initiatives; reliance on cost-benefit analyses to ensure the best configuration of developmental objectives and optimization of limited financial resources; strategies to leverage unbalanced global power dynamics, improve fiscal policy space, and protect the region’s aspirations; decision-making informed by real-time evidence-based data that is sufficiently disaggregated to ensure that no one is left behind; and M&E to promote robust measurement of results, greater accountability, transparency, and learning. This vision will also require dedicated leadership champions to drive the process and strong political will to implement the types of changes needed for public sector reform essential for this new road map.

Having credible data and regular M&E are particularly important; a more holistic approach to developmental planning cannot be done separately from these critical tools, since these tools contribute to sense-making and accountability. However, these tools will only be effective if governments recognize their value and place priority on their use by ensuring that adequate financial resources are available to modernize and sustain national statistical systems, to collect sufficiently disaggregated data to inform national policies, and to conduct regular M&E.

Still, moving from one extreme to what might be considered another extreme will likely encounter some resistance. This is to be expected and is unique neither to the Caribbean public sector nor to the Caribbean environment. Employees everywhere generally do not like to be taken outside of their comfort zone. Presently, mediocre performance by senior public officials in the Caribbean is largely tolerated. Moreover, many Caribbean nationals view “government corruption as a big problem” (MacDonald, 2021, p. 24), and this needs to be addressed or economic progress will stagnate. Moving toward an M&E culture is a difficult endeavor under the best of circumstances. However, the Caribbean public sector can no longer operate with an attitude of business as usual. Given the myriad challenges that the region confronts, a different strategy is urgently needed so that the region can prosper and grow, whilst simultaneously becoming more resilient and sustainable. The current way of doing things is not generating the desired results. In moving forward, more accountability and transparency must be exhibited, and learning must be utilized to avoid similar mistakes so that regional governments can optimize their scarce financial resources and do more societal good with the limited financial resources at their disposal (Persaud & Yates, 2023). Departure from the traditional public sector status quo is thus inevitable.

Conclusion

The Caribbean region faces myriad challenges, including limited financial resources and climate-induced events that are affecting its prosperity and growth and in many instances eroding developmental progress already gained. The region needs to become more resilient to better withstand shocks. The region also needs to think about how to incorporate the United Nations 2030 sustainable development goals agenda into its developmental framework so that every Caribbean citizen can enjoy a basic and decent standard of living. Additionally, the Caribbean needs to become more sustainability conscious so that current decisions do not compromise future generations, whilst simultaneously trying to create economic growth and ensure social well-being and environmental care. The consideration of these issues requires a transformational vision of developmental planning that is holistic and proactive. The ingredients for the success of this approach include credible, objective, sufficiently disaggregated evidence-based data to inform policy-making; development of an M&E culture that promotes accountability,

transparency, and learning; and political will to anchor and drive the process. Transformational vision is, however, a complex exercise, one that will likely encounter some resistance along the way. At this juncture, Caribbean countries need to step back, reflect, and think about an appropriate holistic developmental strategy that is suitable for advancing the region's aspirations.

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