

Report: Wilton Park virtual dialogue

Caribbean2030 Leaders Network 5 (C2LN-5): Addressing the new 'normal' post Covid-19

Friday 3 July 2020 | WP1806V

C2LN meeting organised with support from Caribbean Policy Research Institute (CaPRI) and Wilton Park

The Caribbean2030 Leaders Network brings together young, active leaders from across the Caribbean region to discuss relevant issues and put together realistic goals in order to address these issues. Organised by the Caribbean Research Policy Institute (CAPRI,) Wilton Park and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the primary goal of this fifth, virtual gathering was to discuss the initial impact of COVID-19 on the Caribbean, and to address the possible lasting effects that the pandemic will have on the region. The concept of the “new normal” was the main theme with three concurrent discussion questions:

- What **will** the new normal in the Caribbean look like?
- What **should** the new normal look like?
- What **role** can C2LN play in managing the new normal and bringing the desired new normal into being?

Executive Summary

A more technologically inclined Caribbean is likely to be a permanent outcome to COVID-19. Recommendations by the C2LN group for how the new normal might look included:

- i. Shared health resources across islands, eg pooling monetary contributions for specific requirements with ITU; tele-medical expansion;
- ii. Using tech for greater efficiency of food production, and linking producer and consumer;
- iii. Ensuring equality through widespread access to the internet to eliminate technology gaps;
- iv. Reliable digital identification system; and financial inclusion and digitisation;
- v. Enabling increased interregional transport linkages.

C2LN can become an incubator, a mutual support network, a bridge across the region through particular initiatives, and an investor pool for civic and business ideas that will address the problems that have been identified and the goals to be achieved. The members have ideas and energy and are eager to take action towards what they wish to accomplish.

Session 1: What will the new normal in the Caribbean look like?

The first session was a reflection on the immediate and medium term response to the pandemic, and speculation about what the new normal in a post-pandemic world is starting to look like. There was a general discussion about the initial observed effects of a global pandemic. COVID-19 has created short and almost certainly long term shifts, which have impacted our international and domestic community, and changed our priorities. The group discussed many of the protocols that were implemented in order to decrease the spread of the virus and how these protocols are likely to become, in some way, a part of the new normal.

The expansion of services to online platforms has been one clear outcome of the pandemic. The most obvious example is with education. As schools closed, the classroom was transformed into an online world. Parents, teachers, and students were forced to learn and adapt to remote learning, and as the education system transitioned, children who did not have devices and/or internet access were left behind. This will likely persist as schools, especially at the tertiary level, take some time to return to full, in-person instruction, if that ever happens.

Other services have also transformed to online delivery. Digital medical practices have blossomed. Instead of visiting a doctor's office during this time, many doctors have been in contact with their patients over telephone or video call in order to keep them away from areas of high risk of catching the virus. An essential service such as a doctor's visit being moved to an online platform is one example of how the pandemic has stimulated a new way to deliver services, and this new normal will likely continue until the pandemic is declared over. Online services and digital platforms have also been expanded to produce new events such as virtual parties and remote worship sessions.

The new normal will likely require continued physical distancing and greater sensitivity to hand hygiene, along with ubiquitous temperature scanning. So products and services that cannot be delivered entirely online will reflect these requirements and preferences.

The private sector has also experienced drastic changes as business models that previously relied on in-person presence implemented digital components such as online shopping and online payment transactions, even with physical pick up. Most individuals had to become accustomed to working online as work from home orders were implemented worldwide.

The tourism sector went through a radical change too as travel safety protocols were completely reformed. Border closures of several months, and, once borders reopened health screenings, full body infrared scanners, rapid COVID-19 testing, electronic contact tracing and, in many countries, quarantine upon arrival, became necessary precautions and this has greatly impacted the level of travel that many are willing to partake in. These factors will continue to constrain tourism for some time.

Session 2: What should the new normal look like?

In this session, the group discussed what an ideal new normal in specific sectors would look like, and the benefits of nudging the Caribbean in that direction. A more technologically inclined Caribbean region was the base of all of the suggestions for the ideal new normal. This same desire, a modern, and technologically savvy region, was strongly advocated for in the first C2LN meeting held in 2015, proving that the efforts and overall goals of the group have remained the same.

The first group discussed the impact of health and human interaction during the pandemic, including ideas which would have helped the Caribbean better manage the medical demands of the pandemic and protocols that were implemented to aid the region, and should be continued post-pandemic. In order to obtain a higher level of health care services, it was suggested that islands can pool monetary contributions for narrow needs in the health sector, such as more equipment for Intensive Care Units and higher quality instruments. By doing so, countries would work together to provide a high level of health care to all citizens by investing in modern equipment. This would not only produce more intraregional cooperation but it would also improve the quality of health care in many Caribbean islands.

The group also highlighted how services have evolved and how that evolution should persist going forward. The example raised in one session was the advance in tele-medicine, such as the ability to phone doctors to get advice rather than having to go into office, which is especially crucial during the pandemic for social distancing purposes. It was suggested that maintaining this service and extending it could increase access to health care and advice. This technology could also be applied to a number of other health practices, such as remote diagnosis and remote counselling services for mental health patients.

During the pandemic, countries were made aware of the technological disadvantages that many of their residents faced, and in the ideal new normal, this inequality should be mitigated. The new normal should ensure that social values are redefined to bring about a widespread level of technological sophistication. The group emphasised the need for more innovation driven by new technology, and the desire to eliminate the technology gap. By closing this gap, and becoming a more technological savvy society, a farmer's world and business would be expanded as they would be able to not just share information amongst themselves but they would also be modernising their approaches, and this could make the sector more attractive to young people. A technological approach would also help to increase the efficiency of food production by facilitating the sharing of information between producers, consumers, and middlemen, and help to push a new market of intraregional trade, both of which were observed to be inhibiting factors of this sector. Farmers were severely disadvantaged when their markets were disrupted by the closure of hotels and schools.

Advanced trading amongst Caribbean countries would have immense benefits by providing one country with a product that they may lack, and vice versa. The development of a technological platform would be extremely useful within this sector as it would increase coordination and equity across the trade sector, and especially within the region.

The new normal in **communication and the digital economy** was also discussed, and, again, based in a much needed technological revolution within the region. The main point of this discussion was that there needs to be more widespread availability to internet access in order to obtain equal access for all. Universal broadband access becomes more important now not only because of the pandemic but because the new normal will include more virtual activities and services. Providing widespread access to the internet and devices is necessary as people who were left out during a pandemic, due to lack of access, will be even more left out now and will be left behind while the rest of the world continues on a technologically inclined path.

The group also described the importance of having a more trustworthy and reliable **digital identification system**, especially during this time of social distancing, as it becomes more necessary to verify digital signatures and use digital financial services. **Financial inclusion** was also a point of discussion. The new normal should be a world in which digitisation is more widespread and where there is broad access to digitised services. If financial inclusion could be resolved via mobile service providers, this would allow for maximum accessibility and close a gap that exists in telecommunications and digital services.

A final note about a desirable new normal was one in which the Caribbean was viewed as one upcoming region in its entirety. Caribbean members need to build resilience and aid transformation by educating ourselves and adopting global best practices. By continually adapting, the group could build better partnerships and access to networks for a vision of One Caribbean.

Session 3: What role can C2LN play in managing the new normal and bringing the desired new normal into being?

The third and final session revolved around the features of the Caribbean2030 Leaders Network, and the steps going forward. The guiding question for this session was: What **role** can C2LN play? The point of this final session was to discuss what priority themes the group wanted to work on, what approach C2LN would like to take, who does C2LN want to influence, how can the group achieve this, and, finally, how can C2LN leverage its network to its best advantage. C2LN is made up of people who are innovative, and ambitious within their respective fields. The members have ideas and energy and are eager to take action towards what they wish to accomplish.

One approach that was encouraged was that C2LN become an incubator, a mutual support network, and an investor pool for civic and business ideas that will address the problems that have been identified and the goals to be achieved. The coordination and protection of the creations and policies that are discussed within the group need to be implemented by fellow group members, as opposed to the alternative, which is leaving action to other bodies to tell the group what can or cannot be done. The group needs to proactively protect and react to what it has discussed in order to further their purpose and make significant change.

Conclusion

The Caribbean2030 Leaders Network should be viewed as a bridge, linking the private sectors across the Caribbean. Not the kind of bridge that links them as sectors but rather through particular initiatives. The group can collectively identify major problems and align these problems to corresponding actors or potential actors, and in that way be an intra regional link. The group will address what it specifically needs to meet these goals and it needs to be more collective.

Emphasis was placed on the level of accountability assigned in following up on what is agreed upon during meetings and actually taking action. There was a general desire for a form of administrative follow up in some of the matters that need to be dealt with, and by doing so, there must be some capacity to make the network more effective than it has been. The next steps rely on the group members. How they choose to follow up, and implement the ideas that emerged within the conference, will have significant effects on what the group can achieve going forward. Group members must place responsibility upon themselves to implement the change, and by doing so, the Caribbean2030 Leaders Network will achieve more respect and be viewed as the driven, policy provoking group that it envisioned for itself at its inauguration.

By CAPRI and Wilton Park | August 2020

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