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A perfect storm in the Caribbean requires a concerted response

The countries of the Caribbean are facing a perfect storm of events that pose a severe threat to the health of their people. 2018 was the third consecutive year of above average meteorological activity, with several countries, including Anguilla and the British Virgin Islands, devastated by major hurricanes. The effects of climate change mean the situation can only get worse.

In addition, the high toll of premature deaths from non-communicable diseases (NCDs) in this region continues. The 2007 Port of Spain Declaration, signed by the Caribbean Community heads of government, paved the way for the 2011 UN High Level Meeting on NCDs,¹ but little progress has been made in these countries to date. The region also faces continuing threats from infectious diseases, especially HIV and AIDS, and from violence. Although some countries in the region are extremely safe, others have among the highest homicide rates in the world.²

Together, these threats would be sufficient to justify governments placing health high on the political agenda, but we must also consider the threats to the economies of these small countries from events elsewhere. Most experienced severe declines in tourism after the 2008 global financial crisis.³ Now, two of the most important nations for Caribbean tourism face particular threats, with the USA engaged in a damaging global trade war and the UK in turmoil with Brexit. Although less economically important, the risks to trade in agricultural products must also be considered, given continuing confusion about future trading arrangements.

Finally, the crisis in Venezuela is also affecting the Caribbean. More than 100 000 Venezuelan people have already fled to Caribbean countries, with expectations of many more.⁴

The health system in Venezuela has largely broken down; the prevalence of HIV, malaria, and tuberculosis has increased to levels not seen for decades, and outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases are now affecting neighbouring countries.⁵

Extraordinary situations demand extraordinary responses. The countries of the Caribbean cannot tackle these problems individually. As they did in Port of Spain in 2007, we call upon the political leaders in this region to renew their commitment to tackle the threats to the health of the people of this region, but this time to work together to develop a comprehensive approach to these shared challenges.

We declare no competing interests.

***Sandeep Maharaj,
Terence Seemungal, Martin McKee**
sandeep.maharaj@sta.uwi.edu

Faculty of Medical Sciences, The University of the West Indies, St Augustine Campus, St Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago (SM, TS); and London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, London, UK (MM)

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