

Negotiating Sovereignty in the Postcolonial Caribbean

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Abstract: The Caribbean continues to navigate the legacies of colonialism amid contemporary challenges of governance, development, and sovereignty. Despite formal independence, many states retain centralized, hierarchical structures inherited from colonial rule, constraining participatory mechanisms and complicating relations with civil society. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have emerged as pivotal actors in addressing social, environmental, and developmental needs, yet they operate within fragmented legal frameworks, uncertain funding environments, and politically mediated contexts. This analysis synthesizes historical, theoretical, and empirical scholarship to examine how postcolonial legacies and postinternational dynamics shape NGO–state interactions across the region. Analytical coding of scholarly and policy sources identified themes of negotiated sovereignty, civil society capacity, and collaborative resilience. Findings reveal that NGOs not only fill governance gaps but also redefine sovereignty as a networked and negotiated process, particularly in disaster response, gender justice, and transparency initiatives. These insights accentuate the potential of integrating NGOs into formal governance systems, offering actionable guidance for policymakers, civil society leaders, and development practitioners seeking inclusive, accountable, and adaptive governance in small island states.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, Civil society, Caribbean politics, Sovereignty, Postinternationalism, Resilience, Governance

Introduction

The Caribbean remains a region where historical legacies and contemporary challenges converge within a complex and dynamic political, social, and economic environment. Long after the formal end of colonial rule, Caribbean states continue to contend with inherited political and economic structures, persistent inequality, uneven development, and ongoing debates over sovereignty and self-determination (Clegg & Seremani, 2016; Gottsche, 2017). Postcolonial theory offers a critical lens for examining these dynamics, emphasizing how historical patterns of domination and exploitation continue to shape present-day realities through structural inequalities, dependency relationships, and cultural hybridity (Bhabha, 1994; Fanon, 1952; Said, 1978). This perspective highlights the importance of understanding how colonial legacies interact with modern forces of globalization, migration, and transnationalism, producing both constraints and opportunities for governance, social policy, and civic engagement.

Within this postcolonial context, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have emerged as key actors in Caribbean development, governance, and social transformation. Across the region, NGOs fulfill diverse roles that range from supporting community safety and disaster recovery in Jamaica and Haiti, to advancing gender justice, environmental protection, and social equity in Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados, and other islands (Hopper, Lassou, & Soobaroyen, 2016; Pineda, 2013). These organizations often function as

intermediaries between citizens and the state, filling gaps left by resource-constrained or bureaucratically limited public institutions. Their work exemplifies a form of civic engagement that is both responsive to local needs and influenced by global norms and transnational networks. At the same time, the growing prominence of NGOs raises critical questions concerning legitimacy, accountability, governance authority, and the balance of power in small island developing states, where historical patterns of centralization and external dependency remain influential (Simpson & Williams, 2018).

The evolving relationship between NGOs and the state illustrates both continuity and transformation within Caribbean governance. Continuity is evident in the persistence of centralized political structures, often reflecting patterns inherited from colonial administrations, while transformation is manifest in the emergence of collaborative governance arrangements shaped by globalization, digital technologies, and cross-border partnerships (Rosenau, 1998; Payne & Bishop, 2010). Examining this intersection of history, power, and policy is essential for reconceptualizing governance models capable of supporting sustainable, inclusive, and equitable development across the wider Caribbean. A nuanced understanding of these dynamics not only illuminates the roles of NGOs in contemporary state-society relations but also provides insights into how Caribbean nations might navigate the dual pressures of historical legacy and modern global forces in pursuit of long-term social and economic resilience.

Problem Statement

Despite decades of political independence, governance in the Caribbean continues to be heavily influenced by administrative structures inherited from colonial rule. These legacies manifest in centralized bureaucracies, limited institutional capacity, and fragmented policy implementation across multiple sectors (Clegg & Seremani, 2016; Gottsche, 2017). Participatory governance mechanisms, such as citizen engagement and consultative policy processes, remain uneven, constraining opportunities for inclusive decision-making. In this environment, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have emerged as essential actors in service delivery, social development, and policy advocacy. Yet, these organizations frequently operate within poorly defined legal frameworks, face inconsistent state engagement, and contend with limited financial and technical resources (SOFRECO, 2009; Pino, 2010).

While the critical role of NGOs in supporting communities is widely acknowledged, current literature provides insufficient insight into the structural and historical factors shaping NGO-state relationships across the Caribbean. There is a notable gap in understanding how postcolonial conditions, such as enduring dependency patterns, economic vulnerabilities, and cultural hybridity, interact with global forces like transnational funding, international development norms, and regional integration to influence collaborative governance (Bhabha, 1994; Fanon, 1952; Said, 1978; Rosenau, 1998). This gap limits scholars' and policymakers' ability to conceptualize governance models that effectively balance state authority, civil society agency, and the pursuit of equitable development. Without a comprehensive, region-wide analysis, strategies to enhance legitimacy, accountability, and institutional capacity remain fragmented, reactive, and contextually narrow.

Purpose, Significance and Nature of the Study

The purpose of this paper is to examine the NGO-state relationship in the Caribbean through the dual frameworks of postcolonialism and postinternationalism. By synthesizing historical, theoretical, and empirical literature, this review seeks to illuminate how colonial legacies, shifting notions of sovereignty, and globalization influence the interaction between

state and civil society. The paper emphasizes the applied significance of these relationships in strengthening democratic governance and advancing inclusive development across Caribbean societies.

This analysis contributes to scholarly and policy discourses on Caribbean governance by bridging theoretical and applied perspectives. It emphasizes the importance of integrating NGOs into formal governance systems as legitimate partners in development, particularly in contexts where state capacity is limited. The paper extends postcolonial theory into applied governance studies, demonstrating how historical legacies of exclusion and hierarchy continue to influence institutional relationships. Its insights are relevant to regional policymakers, civil society leaders, and development practitioners seeking innovative approaches to participatory governance, transparency, and resilience in small island developing states.

This narrative literature review employed a structured, interpretive methodology combining breadth and depth of analysis across historical and contemporary sources. Academic materials were accessed primarily through ProQuest, EBSCOhost, JSTOR, ERIC, and Google Scholar, supplemented by regional policy reports and NGO assessments. Boolean search terms included: “*Caribbean governance*,” “*civil society*,” “*NGO–state relations*,” “*Caribbean development*,” “*postcolonialism*,” “*Caribbean politics*,” “*fragmentation*,” and “*postinternationalism*.” Inclusion criteria comprised English-language, peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and official regional reports published between 1980 and 2024, emphasizing governance, postcolonial analysis, or development in the Caribbean. Exclusion criteria eliminated non-academic commentaries, outdated pre-1980 studies not foundational to postcolonial theory, and duplicates. Approximately 120 sources were screened, with 68 retained for synthesis based on relevance, methodological rigor, and conceptual alignment. Analytical coding identified themes related to postcolonial identity, sovereignty, civil society capacity, and policy processes, producing a synthesized framework for understanding NGO–state relations.

Postcolonial Frameworks and Caribbean Realities

Postcolonial theory provides a critical framework for understanding the enduring legacies of colonialism in Caribbean governance, identity, and social structures. Said’s (1978) *Orientalism* illuminates how Western powers constructed colonized populations as inferior, dependent, and fundamentally “other,” producing epistemic hierarchies that continue to shape global and local power relations. Fanon (1952) extends this analysis to the psychological domain, arguing that colonized peoples internalize the colonizer’s gaze, resulting in a pervasive sense of self-alienation and ambivalence toward indigenous cultural expressions. Spivak’s (1988) concept of the subaltern further complicates the picture by emphasizing the systematic silencing of marginalized voices, revealing the mechanisms through which dominant structures of knowledge and authority maintain hegemony. Collectively, these theories offer an essential lens for examining how Caribbean political, social, and economic institutions continue to reproduce, consciously or unconsciously, colonial hierarchies of governance and decision-making.

Caribbean intellectuals and writers have localized these postcolonial insights, providing rich accounts of identity, hybridity, and the negotiation of historical legacies. Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) interrogates the psychological and social consequences of colonial displacement, while Derek Walcott’s *A Far Cry from Africa* (2007) explores the tensions of cultural duality and moral ambiguity in postcolonial societies. Senior’s (1994) *Gardening in the Tropics*, as interpreted by Stouck (2005), employs the metaphor of the garden to depict the interactions between imperial structures and indigenous forms of knowledge and resilience. These creative works echo scholarly discourse: the Caribbean

exists in a continual negotiation between the residual influence of colonial structures and the assertion of local agency, demonstrating that cultural hybridity is not merely symbolic but materially embedded in social and political institutions (Bhabha, 1994; Hall, 1994).

This hybridity has direct implications for governance. As Guruprasad (2014) and Rosenau (2003) observe, Caribbean societies often experience what may be termed “cultural frammegration,” where multiplicity becomes both a source of resilience and a locus of tension. Diverse ethnic, linguistic, and religious identities intersect with colonial-era administrative frameworks, producing governance systems that privilege centralization over participatory engagement. The result is a persistent challenge: designing policies and institutional structures that accommodate cultural plurality while fostering cohesion, legitimacy, and accountability. Within this context, NGOs play a dual role, both extenuating the limitations of the state and navigating the same complex postcolonial landscapes that shape political authority. Understanding the interplay of historical legacy, cultural hybridity, and institutional structures is therefore crucial for any analysis of Caribbean governance, especially when considering strategies for sustainable development, social inclusion, and equitable policy outcomes.

Evolution of the Caribbean State and Governance Tradition

The Caribbean state emerged from colonial rule as a liberal–authoritarian institution primarily designed to maintain order, protect property, and manage economic production rather than to foster broad-based citizen participation or inclusive development (Ledgister, 2006; Girvan, 2005). Colonial administrative legacies, centralized bureaucracies, hierarchical decision-making, and an emphasis on elite control, were inherited almost wholesale by newly independent states, producing governance structures that reinforced social stratification and limited civic engagement (Payne & Bishop, 2010). Even constitutional frameworks modeled on Westminster parliamentary systems, which ostensibly promote representative democracy, were adapted to societies deeply shaped by economic dependency, racial hierarchies, and elite dominance. This combination created a paradox: formal democratic institutions coexisted with authoritarian tendencies, bureaucratic rigidity, and limited mechanisms for citizen influence.

The failure of the West Indies Federation (1947–1962) and the uneven progress of CARICOM integration exemplify structural constraints in regional governance, highlighting enduring fragmentation, national rivalries, and the difficulties of implementing collective policy in postcolonial contexts (Girvan, 2005; Payne & Bishop, 2010). Such fragmentation has implications for the standardization of governance practices, coordination of social development programs, and the regulation of transnational actors such as NGOs, whose effectiveness depends in part on predictable and coherent state frameworks. Across the Caribbean, varying colonial experiences, French, Spanish, Dutch, and British, produced heterogeneous governance traditions, yet common patterns of centralized authority, bureaucratic formalism, and limited participatory channels persist.

Trinidad and Tobago provides a representative case study of these dynamics. Independence in 1962 introduced a liberal-constitutional framework emphasizing civil liberties, property rights, and bureaucratic discipline (Ledgister, 2006). Nevertheless, the state’s institutional form retained the hierarchical and centralized characteristics of its colonial predecessor. As in Jamaica and Guyana, middle-class actors initially mobilized through labor movements and nationalist politics gradually became integrated into bureaucratic structures, a process that reinforced the distance between the state and ordinary citizens (Munroe, 2006). This historical trajectory has created enduring barriers to participatory governance, limiting opportunities for citizens and civil society organizations to influence policy effectively.

Moreover, the persistence of “colonial statehood” has tangible consequences for NGO–state relations. NGOs operate within a governance ecosystem shaped by legal ambiguities, centralized decision-making, and bureaucratic inertia, often requiring negotiation with multiple layers of authority to implement programs (Hopper, Lassou, & Soobaroyen, 2016). These structural constraints underscore the importance of examining governance not only as a formal institutional arrangement but also as a set of relational and cultural practices that mediate power, authority, and civic participation. Across the wider Caribbean, the interplay between historical legacies, contemporary state structures, and civil society engagement highlights the need for innovative models of collaborative governance capable of addressing persistent inequality, social exclusion, and capacity limitations in small island developing states.

NGOs and Civil Society: Agents of Development and Accountability

Since the 1980s, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have emerged as pivotal actors in Caribbean development, reflecting both global donor-driven imperatives and locally rooted civic mobilization (Hopper, Lassou, & Soobaroyen, 2016; Montoute, Mohammed, & Francis, 2019). NGOs operate across a wide spectrum of social, economic, and environmental concerns, including human rights advocacy, gender equity, disaster risk reduction, education, healthcare, and community development (Pino, 2010; Tack, 2016). Their growing prominence is directly linked to the limitations of postcolonial state structures, which often struggle to provide comprehensive services due to bureaucratic rigidity, resource scarcity, and fragmented governance frameworks (SOFRECO, 2009).

The Caribbean presents diverse examples of NGO-state collaboration that illustrate both the potential and the complexity of civil society engagement. In Jamaica, the Violence Prevention Alliance integrates local knowledge and community-based interventions into national policy, serving as a model for evidence-informed collaboration between the state and civil society (Bowen, 2013). Trinidad and Tobago demonstrates similar patterns in the gender and environmental sectors, where organizations such as the Rape Crisis Society and environmental advocacy groups coordinate with government agencies to advance social justice and climate resilience initiatives. In Haiti, the NGO presence is particularly pronounced, often supplanting state functions in health, education, and disaster response due to weak institutional capacity and historical political instability (Payne & Bishop, 2010). Across the wider Caribbean, NGOs have thus become essential intermediaries between citizens and the state, facilitating service delivery, promoting civic engagement, and fostering social accountability.

Despite these contributions, the NGO sector in the Caribbean is constrained by structural, administrative, and political challenges. Legal registration and regulatory frameworks remain fragmented and inconsistent, oscillating between the Companies Act, Charitable Status legislation, and ad hoc government oversight, creating ambiguity regarding accountability, governance, and operational legitimacy (SOFRECO, 2009; Hopper et al., 2016). Funding structures are often precarious, heavily dependent on external donors, international development agencies, and project-based grants, which can limit organizational autonomy and sustainability (Tack, 2016). Additionally, many NGOs face capacity limitations in research, policy advocacy, and strategic planning, undermining their ability to engage in evidence-based governance or to influence systemic reform (Bowen, 2013). Political interference, whether through co-optation, regulatory pressure, or selective partnerships, further complicates the credibility and independence of the sector, especially in contexts where state institutions retain a high degree of hierarchical control.

Nevertheless, NGOs continue to play a transformative role in Caribbean societies, acting as incubators of social innovation, amplifiers of marginalized voices, and

mechanisms for public trust-building in environments where the state is perceived as distant, unresponsive, or inequitable. Their work exemplifies the potential for collaborative governance models, particularly when NGOs negotiate strategic partnerships with governments, regional organizations, and transnational networks to co-produce social goods (Rosenau, 1998; Payne & Bishop, 2010). Importantly, the NGO sector's capacity to mediate postcolonial inequalities, by addressing gaps in social services, fostering citizen participation, and advocating for marginalized communities, underscores its significance within Caribbean governance frameworks. Understanding these dynamics is critical for analyzing both the structural limitations and innovative potentials of governance across small island developing states, where history, institutional design, and civil society intersect in complex and context-specific ways.

Postinternationalism and Sovereignty in Transition

Rosenau's (1998, 2003) concept of postinternationalism provides a valuable framework for understanding governance in the Caribbean, where authority increasingly transcends the traditional nation-state. Postinternationalism recognizes that political power and decision-making are no longer the sole domain of states, but are distributed across multiple actors and levels, including regional organizations, non-governmental networks, and transnational institutions. Rosenau's notion of *framegration*, which describes the simultaneous forces of integration and fragmentation, is particularly relevant to the Caribbean. Small island states navigate the pressures of global interdependence, through trade, finance, climate agreements, and international development aid, while asserting local governance prerogatives rooted in historical, cultural, and institutional legacies.

Traditional concepts of sovereignty, long associated with exclusive territorial authority, are increasingly complicated by the Caribbean's embeddedness in overlapping governance structures. Krasner's (2001) typology of sovereignty, Westphalian, domestic, interdependence, and international legal, offers a framework for examining how Caribbean states exercise authority unevenly across these dimensions. For example, Barbados maintains relatively strong domestic sovereignty, with stable institutions, functional bureaucracies, and predictable policy implementation. In contrast, Haiti and St. Vincent rely extensively on international assistance and donor interventions for essential services, illustrating the limits of domestic and interdependence sovereignty (Payne & Bishop, 2010; Villar, 2020). Trinidad and Tobago's engagement with the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) exemplifies negotiated sovereignty, whereby the state voluntarily shares oversight authority with civil society and transnational actors to enhance transparency and accountability in the natural resource sector (TTEITI, 2024). Similarly, Caribbean participation in regional frameworks such as CARICOM, the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS), and climate adaptation networks reflects the blending of domestic authority with regional and global governance imperatives.

This evolving configuration of sovereignty challenges the postcolonial assumption of state primacy, which presumes the nation-state as the ultimate locus of power. Held and McGrew (2003) argue that authority increasingly resides in networks of non-state actors, and this is evident across the Caribbean, where NGOs, regional bodies, and international organizations participate directly in policy formulation, program implementation, and monitoring. Postcolonial states must therefore reconceptualize sovereignty as relational and performative, emphasizing the capacity to engage effectively in global, regional, and local governance networks rather than asserting autonomy in isolation. Such reconceptualization has practical implications for policy and development: it requires Caribbean states to cultivate institutional flexibility, transparency, and collaboration with civil society while negotiating the conditions under which external actors influence domestic governance.

The implications of postinternational sovereignty extend beyond institutional arrangements to questions of legitimacy, accountability, and citizen engagement. In contexts where historical inequalities persist and state capacity remains uneven, NGOs and regional bodies serve as critical intermediaries that reinforce governance, facilitate social inclusion, and provide mechanisms for oversight (Bowen, 2013; Hopper et al., 2016). By operating within these multi-level networks, Caribbean states can leverage postinternationalism to address persistent governance challenges, including inequality, climate vulnerability, and economic dependency. In doing so, sovereignty is not diminished but rather redefined: it becomes a measure of a state's ability to navigate complexity, coordinate actors, and achieve socially and economically meaningful outcomes for its citizens.

Climate Change, Crisis, and Collaborative Resilience

The Caribbean's acute vulnerability to natural disasters, hurricanes, floods, and rising sea levels, highlights the need for effective collaboration between states and non-governmental actors. Hurricanes Maria (2017) and Dorian (2019) revealed both the limitations of state capacity and the indispensable role of NGOs and community-based organizations in disaster response. While national governments coordinated relief and recovery efforts through institutional mechanisms such as the Caribbean Disaster Emergency Management Agency (CDEMA, 2016), NGOs often served as first responders, mobilizing volunteers, providing emergency supplies, and addressing gaps in services for marginalized populations (Montoute et al., 2019; Pineda, 2013). In Trinidad and Tobago, for example, partnerships between local NGOs, municipal authorities, and the Office of Disaster Preparedness and Management (ODPM) have enhanced public communication systems, community preparedness, and post-event recovery planning. Similarly, in Haiti, civil society organizations frequently function as primary providers of food, shelter, and healthcare during disasters, supplementing international aid while navigating fragile governance structures (Bowen, 2013; Villar, 2020).

These cooperative frameworks exemplify Rosenau's (1998) notion of transnationalism, whereby global, regional, and local actors share responsibility for managing complex, cross-border challenges. Caribbean disaster governance demonstrates the potential of multilevel collaboration to increase resilience, yet it also exposes persistent inequalities in organizational capacity, resource allocation, and institutional trust. Small island states face structural challenges, including limited fiscal space, underdeveloped infrastructure, and dependency on international donor funding, which constrain the scalability and sustainability of interventions (Grimm et al., 2023; SOFRECO, 2009). NGOs often operate under precarious conditions, lacking sufficient technical expertise, long-term financing, or formal recognition within national legal frameworks, which affects both effectiveness and legitimacy (Tack, 2016; Hopper et al., 2016).

Addressing these disparities requires not only financial and technical empowerment of local NGOs but also formalized mechanisms for collaboration that integrate community knowledge into policy and planning. Climate resilience initiatives such as the Caribbean Climate Resilience Initiative (CCRI) and the OECS Regional Disaster Vulnerability Reduction Project illustrate the potential of such multilevel coordination, incorporating government agencies, regional bodies, and civil society in risk reduction, early warning systems, and sustainable adaptation strategies (Payne & Bishop, 2010; Villar, 2020). These efforts reinforce the importance of a postinternational governance perspective: sovereignty is no longer solely about territorial control or policy autonomy, but about the capacity of states to engage effectively with non-state actors, regional networks, and international institutions to secure citizen well-being.

Moreover, collaborative resilience is inherently linked to issues of equity and social justice. Vulnerable populations, often women, rural communities, and informal workers, experience disproportionate impacts from climate disasters, yet their voices are frequently underrepresented in planning and implementation processes (Simpson & Williams, 2018; Montoute et al., 2019). NGOs serve as critical intermediaries in amplifying these voices, fostering participatory governance, and ensuring that interventions are responsive to the needs of marginalized groups. As Caribbean states navigate the twin pressures of climate change and postcolonial governance legacies, NGO–state collaboration emerges not only as a practical necessity but as a moral and political imperative, central to building inclusive, adaptive, and sustainable systems of disaster and climate governance.

Policy Process and Networked Governance

The complexity of contemporary Caribbean governance necessitates models that move beyond traditional hierarchical state structures and recognize the interdependence of multiple actors across local, national, and transnational levels. The Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1993) provides a valuable lens for understanding policy dynamics in such contexts. According to the ACF, policy change emerges from the interaction of coalitions composed of actors who share core beliefs and coordinate strategies over extended periods. In the Caribbean, advocacy coalitions linking NGOs, international donors, regional organizations, and state ministries have been instrumental in advancing reforms in gender equity, educational inclusion, and climate adaptation. For instance, partnerships between the Caribbean Policy Development Centre (CPDC), national ministries, and civil society organizations have facilitated the mainstreaming of gender-responsive budgeting in several countries (Montoute et al., 2019; Villar, 2020). However, the effectiveness of these coalitions remains contingent upon political will, institutional capacity, and the stability of leadership within state bureaucracies (Payne & Bishop, 2010). The influence of donors and external funding can both empower and constrain coalition agendas, highlighting the fragmentation characteristic of postcolonial governance and the delicate balance between local agency and external dependency.

The concept of networked governance complements the ACF by emphasizing horizontal coordination, mutual accountability, and collaborative problem-solving among diverse actors (Weible & Sabatier, 2017; Rosenau, 1998). Networked governance recognizes that the production of public goods increasingly involves a constellation of actors, government agencies, NGOs, private sector actors, and citizen groups, rather than relying solely on formal state mechanisms. Barbados's Social Partnership model exemplifies this approach, linking government, business, labor unions, and civil society in a structured consultative process that has helped manage economic crises, labor disputes, and social development initiatives (Ledgister, 2006). In Trinidad and Tobago, intersectoral collaborations in climate adaptation demonstrate the practical utility of networked governance, where NGOs contribute local knowledge, facilitate community engagement, and act as accountability intermediaries, while government agencies provide policy direction and regulatory oversight (TTEITI, 2024; Montoute et al., 2019).

Expanding participatory networks across the Caribbean holds significant promise for institutionalizing NGO engagement in policy processes. Such networks could strengthen accountability mechanisms, reduce governance fragmentation, and enhance adaptive capacity in the face of climate shocks, economic volatility, and social inequality. Moreover, embedding NGOs and community organizations within structured networks allows for more nuanced representation of marginalized populations, aligning with postcolonial critiques that highlight historically silenced voices in policymaking (Spivak, 1988; Hall,

1994). By formalizing these collaborative arrangements, Caribbean states can move toward governance models that are simultaneously inclusive, resilient, and responsive to the dual pressures of local development imperatives and global interdependence (Held & McGrew, 2003; Rosenau, 2003).

Ultimately, the integration of advocacy coalitions and networked governance frameworks underscores the transformative potential of shared authority and multi-actor collaboration. For the Caribbean, where postcolonial legacies, institutional fragilities, and global interdependencies converge, these models provide practical and theoretical guidance for fostering governance systems that are both legitimate and effective in addressing complex social, environmental, and economic challenges.

Conclusion & Recommendations

The literature collectively demonstrates that Caribbean governance exists at the intersection of postcolonial legacies and postinternational dynamics. States are simultaneously constrained by historical hierarchies and exposed to the pressures of global interdependence, creating a complex governance environment that is both fragile and adaptive. Within this context, NGOs have emerged as indispensable actors, mediating between citizens and the state, addressing social inequalities, and promoting participatory engagement. Yet their potential remains contingent upon enabling conditions: coherent legal frameworks, reliable funding streams, technical capacity, and mutual trust with governmental institutions. Without these elements, the promise of collaborative governance remains aspirational rather than operational.

Reconceptualizing governance in the Caribbean necessitates a departure from the inherited liberal-authoritarian paradigm toward more adaptive, networked, and participatory systems. Sovereignty must be understood not merely as the exercise of unilateral authority but as the capacity to collaborate effectively across multiple levels, local, national, and transnational. The NGO-state relationship, when strategically fostered, represents a transformative mechanism capable of addressing persistent fragmentation, reinforcing institutional legitimacy, and advancing equitable, inclusive development across the region. This reconceptualization aligns with postcolonial critiques, which emphasize the importance of local agency, contextual responsiveness, and the incorporation of historically marginalized voices in decision-making.

To advance this agenda, two complementary research approaches are recommended. First, a Modified Delphi Study should be conducted to identify areas of consensus among Caribbean policymakers, NGO leaders, and scholars regarding priorities for strengthening NGO-state collaboration. This structured, iterative method facilitates cross-national dialogue, generates evidence-based indicators for good governance, and supports the co-creation of capacity-building strategies. Its participatory design is particularly suited to small island developing states, enabling policymakers and civil society actors to negotiate shared frameworks while reflecting the region's diverse socio-political realities.

Second, a multisite Action Research Study is proposed to pilot and evaluate joint NGO-state initiatives across selected Caribbean nations. Focus areas may include disaster risk reduction, youth empowerment, climate adaptation, and environmental sustainability. By engaging stakeholders in iterative cycles of planning, action, observation, and reflection, this approach generates contextually grounded, actionable knowledge, enhancing both the practical efficacy and legitimacy of collaborative governance. Moreover, Action Research aligns with the Caribbean's developmental priorities, fostering local capacity, reinforcing civic trust, and demonstrating the transformative potential of participatory governance in postcolonial contexts.

These recommendations provide a roadmap for both scholarly inquiry and policy innovation. They underscore the need for governance systems that are adaptive, inclusive, and resilient, systems capable of integrating NGOs as strategic partners while addressing the enduring legacies of colonialism and the demands of global interdependence. In doing so, the Caribbean can move toward a governance model that not only responds to contemporary challenges but also empowers citizens, strengthens institutions, and advances a more equitable and sustainable regional future.

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