



**CIPRIANI COLLEGE**  
OF LABOUR AND CO-OPERATIVE STUDIES

**BUILDING A RESILIENT FUTURE: INDIGENOUS  
COMMUNITIES AND THE SOCIAL AND  
SOLIDARITY ECONOMY IN THE CARIBBEAN**

# **WORK MATTERS**

## **COLUMN**

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# Building a Resilient Future: Indigenous Communities and the Social and Solidarity Economy in the Caribbean

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From July 23rd to 25th, 2025, the Cipriani College of Labour and Cooperative Studies hosted its annual Caribbean World of Work Forum under the theme “*The Future of Work: A Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) Approach*.” The event welcomed both in-person and online attendees, with vibrant engagement from participants and a wide array of concurrent plenary sessions. Organizations such as Tranquillity Credit Union, the Industrial Court of Trinidad and Tobago set up stations to showcase their operations and offerings, creating a dynamic space for interaction, knowledge sharing, and collaboration were present; and the Guardian Group was our official sponsor for the event.

The session that captured my attention was “Indigenous Collective Benefits and the SSE,” featuring presentations by Mr. Barry Parasram, Mr. Maverick Bokojo, and Mr. Colin Bartholomew. This session provided critical insights into how indigenous communities across the Caribbean are navigating challenges related to development, climate change, governance, and economic empowerment, through the lens of the Social and Solidarity Economy.

Mr. Barry Parasram opened the session by highlighting the deep-rooted climate resilience of Caribbean indigenous communities. Drawing on examples from Dominica, he explained how traditional knowledge has enabled indigenous people to survive harsh climatic events. For instance, after Hurricane Maria in 2017, many indigenous dwellings outperformed modern concrete structures due to designs based on centuries of traditional environmental knowledge. However, despite their resilience, indigenous communities remain highly vulnerable to climate change, facing threats such as coastal erosion, health risks, displacement and disruptions to their livelihoods.

Mr. Parasram emphasized that the exclusion of indigenous voices from national climate policy further compounds these vulnerabilities. He recommended integrating traditional knowledge into national climate adaptation strategies, supporting climate-smart agriculture, and having meaningful consultation with indigenous leaders in policy development. Additional recommendations included improving healthcare and mental health services, providing education in indigenous languages, and promoting sustainable livelihoods such as eco-tourism, fair trade opportunities and skills training.

Mr. Maverick Bokojo presented a case study on rural development in Suriname’s Amazon region, specifically the district of Sipaliwini, an area largely inhabited by indigenous and tribal peoples. These communities depend on eco-tourism, agriculture, hunting, and the use of non-timber forest products for their livelihoods. However, unresolved land rights continue to hinder progress. Suriname has yet to ratify ILO Convention 169, which safeguards the rights of indigenous and tribal people to their ancestral lands. A major step forward came when local communities won a human rights case at the Organization of American States (OAS), prompting the drafting of a national land rights law. Unfortunately, the law remains stuck in Parliament almost a decade later. Climate change has had devastating impacts in Sipaliwini, with recurrent floods disrupting education, access to clean water, and the local economy. Yet, to date, no comprehensive studies have been conducted to assess these socio-economic impacts.

Mr. Bokojo recommended the strengthening of capacity building, implementation of the inclusive government framework, decentralization and strengthening local government, which can build capacity among under-resourced local officials, and passing the national land rights law. Mr. Bokojo noted that while these frameworks show promise, significant challenges remain in implementation. Meaningful development

will require legal recognition of land rights, improved education and healthcare access, and better integration of traditional knowledge into national strategies.

Colin Bartholomew shared his experience working with the Kalinago people of Dominica, the island's indigenous population who live in a designated territory at the highest point of the country. The Kalinago practice communal land ownership, a model that offers both opportunities and challenges for economic development. Mr Bartholomew proposed the creation of a Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI), a cooperative bank tailored to meet the specific needs of the community. This institution would provide services such as savings, loans, and insurance, with profits reinvested into the community in the form of dividends and development initiatives.

What makes Dominica particularly unique is its national commitment to cooperative principles. In fact, what I found to be very interesting is that Mr Bartholomew stated that every child born in Dominica receives a cooperative membership as a baptism gift, embedding cooperative values from birth and contributing to the country having the highest penetration of cooperatives in the world. For the Kalinago, this cultural foundation provides a strong basis for developing community-driven financial models.

However, the community still faces challenges mainly the lack of individual land titles, which prevent residents from using land as collateral for loans. Mr. Bartholomew recommended the proposal of Village Savings and Thrift Institutions (VSTIs), which facilitates economic activities in crafts, agriculture and tourism. Additional recommendations included supporting youth innovation hubs, enhancing digital financial access, and providing targeted microfinance solutions. He concluded that development in the Kalinago Territory must remain culturally relevant and led by the community to ensure long-term, inclusive empowerment.

The “Indigenous Collective Benefits and SSE” session underscored the importance of respecting indigenous governance structures, preserving cultural heritage, and promoting inclusive development models. The insights shared at the forum highlighted both the potential and the urgency of investing in indigenous communities as key drivers of sustainable and equitable development in the Caribbean.