WALKER MERIDIAN
ADVISORY

LEADING RESPONSIBLE TRANSFORMATION

The Institutional Advantage

BUILDING THE CAPABILITIES THAT WILL DEFINE CARIBBEAN COMPETITIVENESS

INSTITUTIONAL CAPABILITY

|

SYSTEM PERFORMANCE

|

TRUSTED OUTCOMES

EXECUTIVE PERSPECTIVES NO. 1
AUGUST 2026

WALKER MERIDIAN EXECUTIVE PERSPECTIVES

The Institutional Advantage

Building the Capabilities That Will Define Caribbean Competitiveness

Perspective No. 1 | Gold Edition | August 2026

EDITORIAL PURPOSE

Walker Meridian Executive Perspectives examines the leadership, governance and institutional choices that shape national competitiveness and organisational performance. Each Perspective combines executive experience, international research and strategic analysis to help decision-makers strengthen institutions and translate ambition into sustained performance.

Walker Meridian Advisory Limited · Leading Responsible Transformation

Executive Summary

Caribbean competitiveness is usually discussed in terms of infrastructure, investment incentives, energy costs, market access, transport connectivity and productive capacity. All matter. Yet similar investments can produce very different outcomes because countries vary in their ability to convert policy, people, data, technology and resources into reliable results. This Perspective focuses on that ability: institutional capability.

Institutional capability is a multiplier of competitiveness. It does not replace geography, infrastructure, markets or macroeconomic fundamentals; it shapes how effectively countries convert those assets into performance. The border is an especially revealing test because a single transaction may require Customs, ports, agriculture, health, standards, security and other agencies to operate as one system despite separate mandates.

International evidence reinforces the argument. The World Trade Organization estimates that full implementation of the Trade Facilitation Agreement could reduce average trade costs by 14.3 per cent. The OECD's 2025 Trade Facilitation Indicators, covering 163 economies, identify border-agency cooperation as the leading area of progress while also showing that it retains the largest potential for further improvement. The World Bank's Logistics Performance Index similarly treats speed, reliability and the predictability of border clearance as core dimensions of logistics performance.1–3

Walker Meridian therefore proposes the BORDER Framework - Business Enablement, Operational Integration, Risk Intelligence, Digital Interoperability, Ecosystem Confidence and Resilient Governance - as a research-informed analytical framework for examining the institutional system behind border performance.

The core proposition is simple: institutional capability is the bridge between national ambition and national performance. For the Caribbean, strengthening that bridge offers a practical way to reduce self-imposed friction, manage structural constraints more intelligently and build a durable institutional advantage.

1. Competitiveness Is Being Redefined

For decades, the vocabulary of competitiveness has been familiar. Countries compete through infrastructure, fiscal policy, market access, skills, logistics, investment promotion and the quality of the business environment. These remain essential. A country without reliable transport infrastructure, affordable energy, capable workers or access to capital cannot simply govern its way around those constraints.

But the operating environment for business has changed. Supply chains are being redesigned around resilience as well as efficiency. Geopolitical tensions increasingly shape sourcing and investment decisions. Climate events expose weaknesses in transport and critical infrastructure. Digital technologies are changing how firms transact with government and how governments assess risk. Artificial intelligence is accelerating decision-making while simultaneously raising new questions about accountability, data governance and public trust.

In this environment, businesses ask a question that is harder to capture in a traditional competitiveness index: can this system be relied upon?

The World Bank's Logistics Performance Index recognises that border clearance is not simply about speed; it also includes simplicity and predictability. Its 2023 report emphasises speed and reliability across supply chains. Uncertainty carries an economic cost: a shipment that is consistently cleared in forty-eight hours may be easier to plan around than one that sometimes clears in six hours and sometimes in four days. Predictability affects inventory, working capital, production schedules, contract performance and confidence to invest.3

The same logic applies beyond the border. A sophisticated port cannot compensate indefinitely for fragmented regulatory processes. A digital platform cannot create value if agencies require the same information in different formats. A regional agreement cannot achieve its full economic effect if implementation varies significantly across participating states. Infrastructure creates capacity; institutions determine how much of that capacity is converted into usable economic value.

Institutional capability therefore belongs alongside the more familiar determinants of competitiveness. It is not a substitute for them; it is a multiplier. The wider the gap between ambition and execution, the more countries risk investing without receiving the full economic return. For Caribbean economies, where scale is limited and external shocks can quickly become domestic pressures, narrowing that gap matters enormously.

> *“Institutional capability is the bridge between national ambition and national performance.”*

2. The Institutional Advantage

The phrase "institutional capacity" is often used to describe staff numbers, budgets, technical skills or the presence of systems. Those inputs matter, but they are not the same as capability.

Walker Meridian uses institutional capability to mean the sustained ability of organisations and systems to convert mandate, leadership, people, data, technology and resources into reliable public outcomes. Capacity describes what an institution has. Performance describes what it achieves at a point in time. Capability asks whether it can repeatedly convert what it has into the outcomes its mandate requires, including when conditions change.

That distinction matters because high-performing individuals do not automatically create a high-performing institution, and high-performing institutions do not automatically create a high-performing system. A Customs administration may modernise its processes while a licensing authority remains manual. A port may automate gate operations while inspection agencies continue to schedule controls sequentially. A government may create a Single Window while agencies retain duplicative information requirements and fragmented accountability. Each organisation may be able to point to progress while the trader continues to experience friction.

The institutional advantage emerges when the system itself becomes capable.

The concept is best understood as a multiplier rather than an all-purpose explanation for competitiveness. Institutions cannot eliminate geography, global freight rates, climate vulnerability, inadequate infrastructure or weak productive capacity. UN Trade and Development has reported that Caribbean port handling charges can be two to three times those at similar ports globally, citing inefficient processes, poor management and infrastructure shortages among the contributing factors. Institutional reform does not erase those structural realities; it influences how intelligently they are managed.4

A country facing high shipping costs has even less room for avoidable administrative delay. A small economy has greater reason to reuse data rather than ask businesses to submit it repeatedly. A region seeking to deepen integration gains more from common standards when national institutions can actually recognise and implement them. A government investing in digital technology gains more when systems are interoperable and decision rights are clear.

The institutional advantage, therefore, is not the absence of constraints. It is the ability to reduce self-imposed friction, coordinate scarce resources and preserve confidence in the face of constraints that cannot easily be changed.

This distinction also explains why governance belongs at the centre of competitiveness. Governance determines who decides, who is accountable, how conflicts are resolved, how information is shared, what performance is measured and whether reforms survive changes in leadership. Without those disciplines, modernisation can remain dependent on projects, personalities or temporary funding rather than becoming embedded institutional behaviour.

Competitive economies are not only those that possess assets. They are those whose institutions repeatedly convert assets into outcomes.

3. The Border Reveals the System

The border makes this argument visible because it forces institutions to meet in one operating environment.

A single shipment may involve Customs, port or airport operators, agriculture and veterinary authorities, health regulators, standards bodies, licensing agencies, security services, transport providers and private-sector intermediaries. Each institution may have a legitimate statutory purpose. The trader, however, does not experience those mandates separately. The trader experiences one border.

That is why the unit of competitiveness is increasingly the system, not the agency.

The WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement recognises this interdependence through provisions dealing with transparency, release and clearance, border-agency cooperation and the simplification of formalities. The WTO estimates that full implementation of the Agreement could reduce average trade costs by 14.3 per cent, with especially significant gains available to developing economies. The precise gains will vary by country, but the direction is clear: friction at the border has economy-wide consequences.

The OECD's 2025 Trade Facilitation Indicators sharpen the point. Across 163 economies, border-agency cooperation was the leading area of progress, yet it began from a relatively limited baseline and retains the largest potential for further improvement. The report also identifies persistent gaps between regulatory frameworks and implementation in practice, especially in automation.2

They reveal an important leadership challenge. Governments tend to organise accountability vertically: ministry by ministry, agency by agency, budget by budget. Businesses experience government horizontally, across the full journey required to achieve an outcome. National competitiveness therefore depends partly on whether public leadership can govern across institutional boundaries rather than merely optimise individual organisations.

This is not an argument for removing statutory independence or collapsing distinct regulatory mandates. Strong systems preserve role clarity. The objective is to ensure that institutional boundaries do not become unnecessary burdens for the user.

The practical question is straightforward: where is the business still carrying a coordination burden that government should resolve internally? Every time a trader must reconcile conflicting instructions, resubmit information already held by government or arrange multiple controls that could have been coordinated, institutional fragmentation transfers cost from the public system to the user.

That transfer consumes time, working capital and managerial attention. More importantly, it weakens confidence in the predictability of the operating environment. The border is therefore more than a trade-administration issue; it is a stress test of whole-of-government capability.

EVIDENCE IN PRACTICE — JAMAICA'S SINGLE WINDOW

Jamaica's Single Window for Trade (JSWIFT) provides a useful Caribbean illustration of the institutional direction of travel. The platform enables traders to submit information through a single access point and apply electronically for licences, permits, certificates and other regulatory requirements involving Cross Border Regulatory Agencies and participating government agencies. Its stated features include single submission, validation, transaction tracking, notifications, electronic payment and greater agency connectivity and collaboration.

The significance of a Single Window is not merely that paper processes become electronic. Its deeper value emerges when information, decisions and institutional responsibilities are redesigned around one user journey. JSWIFT should therefore be viewed as an example of the infrastructure that can support integration, not as proof that institutional integration is ever "finished". Technology creates the platform; governance, participation and operating discipline determine the quality of the system that develops around it.5

4. The Cost of Fragmentation

Fragmentation is expensive precisely because it can exist even when individual institutions are competent.

Consider two similar shipments arriving at neighbouring Caribbean ports. At the first, advance information is available to the relevant agencies. Risk assessments are coordinated. Controls are targeted. Information submitted once can be reused, and responsibilities are sufficiently clear that exceptions are escalated quickly. At the second, agencies operate professionally within their own mandates, but information is requested repeatedly, systems do not communicate, inspections are scheduled sequentially and a small problem can circulate between institutions before anyone owns its resolution.

No single organisation at the second port needs to be failing for the overall system to produce a poor outcome.

Fragmentation is often missing from annual reports because each agency measures its own activity. It may not appear clearly in government budgets because the cost is distributed across traders, consumers and downstream businesses. Yet it becomes visible in storage charges, production delays, missed delivery windows, additional compliance effort and managerial time spent navigating government rather than growing the business.

Digitising fragmentation does not create integration.

In some circumstances, it can make fragmentation faster, more opaque and more difficult to govern. A business may move from carrying paper between offices to navigating several portals that each require similar information. An agency may automate its own workflow without establishing a shared data definition with its partners. A dashboard may provide visibility without creating authority to resolve a cross-agency bottleneck.

This is why the OECD's distinction between regulatory frameworks and implementation is so important. Governments can adopt policies, sign agreements and procure platforms, yet businesses may still encounter friction if operating practices, data standards and accountability do not change with them. The relevant questions are practical: who owns the end-to-end user journey, where duplication remains, what happens when agencies disagree, and how system-level performance is measured.2

The shift from agency modernisation to system modernisation therefore requires leaders to examine outcomes that sit between organisational boundaries. Who owns end-to-end release time? Who is accountable for a duplicate data request involving several agencies? Who decides when two legitimate regulatory objectives conflict? Which performance measures tell a minister or board whether the border system is improving as a whole rather than whether one agency is meeting its targets?

Those questions are uncomfortable because they do not fit neatly into conventional organisational charts. Yet they are precisely the questions that reveal whether national ambition has been converted into institutional capability.

> *“Digitising fragmentation does not create integration.”*

REGIONAL LENS — CARICOM: FROM AGREEMENT TO EXPERIENCE

CARICOM's current regional agenda demonstrates why implementation architecture matters. Recent regional discussions have linked affordability and deeper integration to practical action on intra-regional trade barriers, maritime transport, free movement and mutual recognition. In July 2026, CARICOM leaders and regional private-sector representatives explicitly emphasised the need to move beyond policy dialogue toward coordinated implementation supported by mandates, timelines and measurable outcomes. Work on a regional ferry service, for example, requires enabling regulatory arrangements for areas such as mutual recognition of insurance, licences and road taxes.

The lesson extends beyond transport. Regional agreements create opportunity; national institutions determine whether businesses and citizens actually experience it. Regional integration is ultimately an institutional-capability test.6

5. From Digitalisation to Institutional Integration

Digital transformation can help close these gaps, but only if leaders are clear about what is being transformed.

Digitalisation changes the medium. Institutional transformation changes the operating model.

A Single Window can reduce multiple points of contact. Shared data standards can reduce duplication. Non-intrusive inspection can strengthen control while reducing unnecessary physical examination. Analytics can improve targeting. Artificial intelligence can identify patterns that would be difficult for human analysts to detect at scale.

The World Customs Organization's 2025 work on artificial intelligence and machine learning in Customs identifies requirements extending well beyond algorithms: data management, legal and ethical considerations, infrastructure, pilot testing, workforce capability, cybersecurity, interoperability, data protection, fairness, transparency and accountability. AI adoption is therefore a governance challenge as much as a technology challenge.7

If data quality is weak, automated analysis can reproduce or magnify poor inputs. If accountability is unclear, automated recommendations become harder to challenge responsibly. If systems are fragmented, an advanced model may still see only part of the risk picture. If staff do not understand how a tool works or where human judgement must remain decisive, technological sophistication can outpace organisational readiness.

For Caribbean administrations, this is particularly important because resources are finite. The objective should not be to adopt AI because leading administrations are doing so. It should be to identify high-value problems, assess readiness, establish governance, test proportionately and scale where evidence supports it.

The same principle applies to wider digital transformation. Technology can accelerate, connect, detect and analyse. It cannot independently reconcile competing mandates, determine accountability, establish legal authority or build trust between institutions. The leadership question is therefore not simply, 'What technology should we adopt?' but 'What capability must exist for this technology to create trusted value?' That reframing makes interoperability, data governance, accountability and workforce readiness core conditions of investment rather than secondary implementation concerns.

> *"AI does not remove institutional dependencies. It makes them more consequential."*

WALKER MERIDIAN LEADERSHIP REFLECTION

Technology is often introduced as the instrument of transformation. Experience suggests a more demanding reality. Sustained transformation occurs when leadership, governance, people, processes and institutional relationships evolve together.

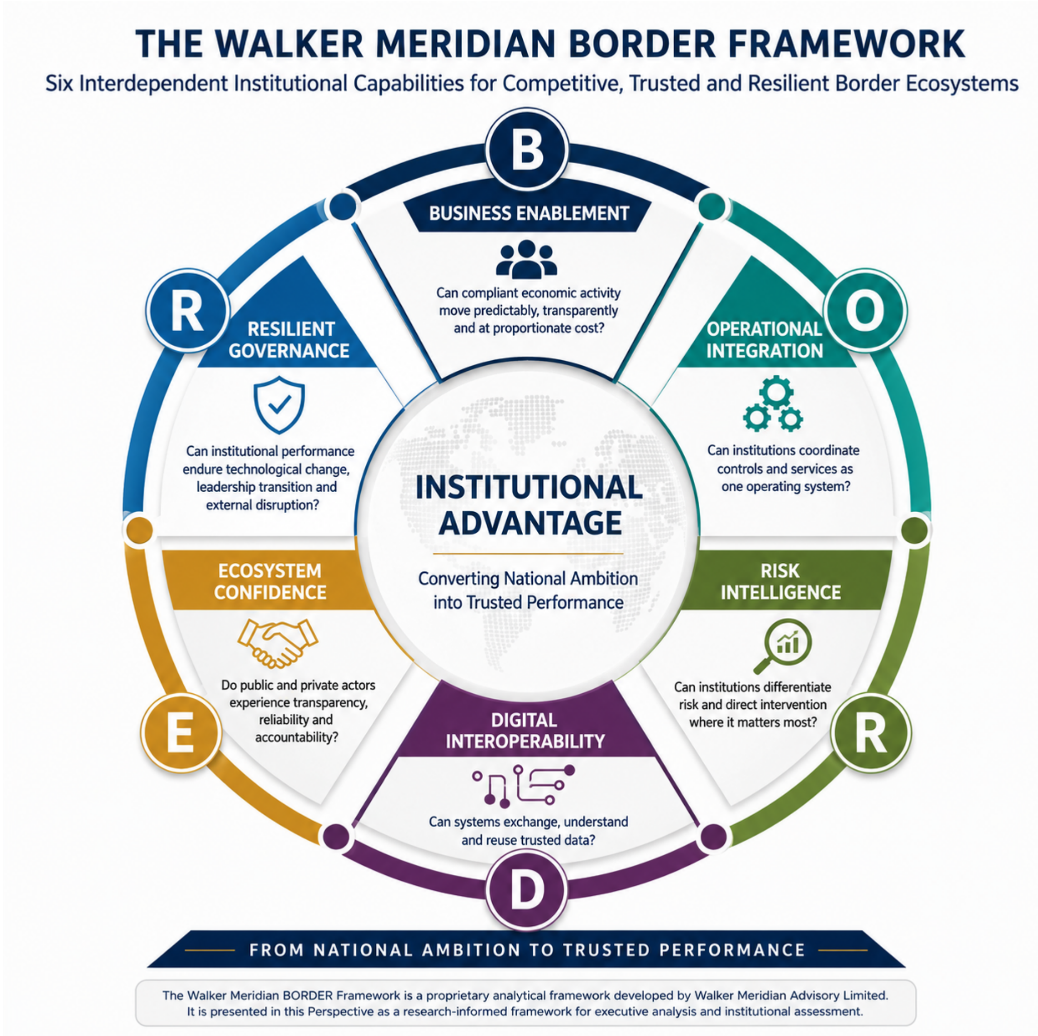
A new platform can create visibility. Analytics can improve decision support. Automation can reduce routine work. None of those changes, by themselves, creates a trusted institution.

For leaders, the test is whether technology strengthens the institution's ability to fulfil its purpose with greater consistency, accountability and resilience. The relevant question is not simply what the technology can do. It is what the institution must become in order to use that technology responsibly and well.

6. The Walker Meridian BORDER Framework

If institutional capability is the multiplier, leaders need a practical way to examine whether that capability exists across the border ecosystem.

The Walker Meridian BORDER Framework is a proprietary, research-informed analytical framework. It identifies six interdependent institutional capabilities that leaders should examine when assessing whether a border ecosystem can convert national ambition into trusted, secure and competitive performance. It is not a statistically validated maturity model, nor a claim that every country should adopt an identical operating design.



The Walker Meridian BORDER Framework: six interdependent institutional capabilities for competitive, trusted and resilient border ecosystems.

B - Business Enablement

The border system should enable compliant economic activity predictably, transparently and at proportionate cost. Facilitation does not mean the absence of control. It means designing control around risk, clarity and legitimate business needs. Leaders should ask whether compliant firms experience government as an enabler of lawful commerce or as an accumulation of institutional requirements. Measures might include transparency of procedures, predictability of release, duplication of requirements, availability of advance processes and the quality of mechanisms for resolving problems.

O - Operational Integration

Institutions should be capable of coordinating controls and service delivery as one operating system. Periodic meetings are not enough. Integration is visible when roles are clear, inspections are coordinated, escalation routes are understood, service standards align and performance is measured across the end-to-end journey. A useful diagnostic question is: where does the user still carry information or coordination burdens that government should resolve internally?

R - Risk Intelligence

Scarce control resources should be directed toward the highest risks rather than applied uniformly because the system lacks intelligence. Risk intelligence combines data, analysis, targeting, post-clearance controls, non-intrusive inspection and human judgement. The leadership question is whether intervention reflects differentiated risk or routine institutional habit. Intelligent control strengthens both security and facilitation because it allows legitimate activity to move while attention is concentrated where consequences are greatest.

D - Digital Interoperability

Systems must be able to exchange, understand and reuse trusted data across organisational boundaries. Connectivity alone is not interoperability. Institutions need common definitions, secure exchange, lawful reuse, clear ownership and resilience. Leaders should ask whether they are digitising agency processes or building a connected institutional environment. If a business submits the same underlying information multiple times because systems cannot understand or trust one another, digitalisation has not yet delivered system transformation.

E - Ecosystem Confidence

Public and private actors need confidence in the transparency, consistency and accountability of the system. Walker Meridian uses institutional confidence to mean the reasonable expectation among users, partners and stakeholders that institutions will act consistently, competently, transparently and accountably over time. Such confidence affects willingness to invest, comply, share information and collaborate; it should persist even when individual personnel change.

R - Resilient Governance

Governance arrangements must sustain performance through technological change, leadership transition, crisis and external disruption. Real capability cannot depend permanently on one exceptional leader or one project team. Decision rights, legal authority, accountability, workforce development, cybersecurity, continuity planning and performance assurance must be institutionalised. The key question is what happens to the system when a major technology fails, a key leader leaves or a crisis invalidates normal operating assumptions.

The BORDER Framework is intentionally interdependent. Business Enablement without Risk Intelligence can weaken control. Risk Intelligence without Digital Interoperability can leave agencies working from incomplete information. Digital Interoperability without Resilient Governance can create concentrated cyber and accountability risks. Operational Integration without Ecosystem Confidence may produce formal coordination without genuine cooperation.

This is why the framework should not be treated as a six-step programme. It is better understood as a system of capabilities that must mature together.

That has implications for leadership.

No single agency can deliver national competitiveness. Customs may be central to the movement of goods, but it cannot independently align health regulation, port operations, licensing, transport policy, data governance and regional commitments. Accountability for system performance therefore has to exist at a sufficiently senior level to cross institutional boundaries.

Political leaders set the national direction and create mandates for collaboration. Boards and governing bodies should ask whether organisational investments contribute to system-level outcomes, not only whether internal projects are on time and on budget. Agency heads must protect statutory responsibilities while resisting the temptation to optimise their own processes at the expense of the wider user journey. The private sector should be treated not only as a stakeholder to be consulted, but as a source of operational evidence about where fragmentation remains.

Regional institutions can add value by focusing increasingly on implementation architecture: common standards, compatibility, timelines, accountability and measurable outcomes.

The next generation of public leadership must govern across institutional boundaries.

That does not require creating a new super-agency for every complex problem. It requires governance mechanisms that make shared outcomes visible and assign sufficient authority to resolve issues that no single institution owns. It requires performance measures that reveal end-to-end results. It requires leaders who are willing to share credit, accept collective accountability and build systems that continue to perform after they leave.

For small Caribbean states, that last point is especially important. The region has no shortage of talented leaders or committed public servants. The institutional advantage emerges when good performance is embedded in structures, standards, data, culture and governance strongly enough to survive turnover and disruption.

That is the difference between a successful reform project and a capable institution.

Conclusion — From Ambition to Advantage

The Caribbean's constraints are real. So are its possibilities.

The region cannot alter its geography, control global freight markets or prevent every external shock. It can, however, determine whether its institutions make those constraints more difficult or manage them intelligently.

That choice is where institutional capability becomes institutional advantage.

The practical agenda is not to abandon infrastructure, investment promotion or technology in favour of governance. It is to recognise that governance shapes how effectively those investments work together. The region should continue building ports and digital platforms, negotiating regional arrangements, modernising regulation and adopting responsible technology. Leaders should judge those initiatives by a more demanding standard: do they strengthen the system's ability to deliver trusted outcomes?

The border offers a useful place to begin because its performance is visible, measurable and inherently cross-institutional. Yet the underlying lesson extends far beyond trade. The same capability challenge exists wherever national outcomes depend on several institutions working together - digital government, investment facilitation, national security, climate resilience, public health and the responsible adoption of AI.

Institutional capability is therefore not an administrative concern sitting below strategy. It is one of the mechanisms through which strategy becomes reality.

For Caribbean leaders, the opportunity is to make that capability deliberate: to simplify where complexity adds no value; integrate where fragmentation transfers cost to citizens and business; use intelligence to focus scarce resources; build interoperable digital environments; strengthen confidence through transparent and accountable performance; and govern institutions so that progress survives disruption and leadership change.

The Caribbean's next competitive advantage may not be something it builds.

It may be the capability with which it governs what it already has.

> *“The Caribbean’s next competitive advantage may not be something it builds. It may be the capability with which it governs what it already has.”*

Notes and Sources

1. World Trade Organization (WTO). Trade facilitation. Full implementation of the Trade Facilitation Agreement is estimated to reduce trade costs by an average of 14.3 per cent. https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/tradfa_e/tradfa_e.htm

2. OECD (2025). OECD Trade Facilitation Indicators: Monitoring Policies up to 2025. The report covers 163 economies; border-agency cooperation is the leading area of progress and retains the largest potential for further improvement, with continuing implementation gaps. https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/oecd-trade-facilitation-indicators_fd6f27dc-en.html

3. World Bank (2023). Logistics Performance Index 2023 and International Scorecard. The LPI addresses speed and reliability, including the speed, simplicity and predictability of border clearance formalities. https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2023/04/21/world-bank-releases-logistics-performance-index-2023 and https://lpi.worldbank.org/

4. UN Trade and Development (UNCTAD) (2024). Latin America-Caribbean shipping struggles amid geopolitical and climate crises. UNCTAD reports Caribbean port handling charges two to three times higher than at similar ports globally, linked to inefficient processes, poor management and infrastructure shortages. https://unctad.org/press-material/latin-america-caribbean-shipping-struggles-amid-geopolitical-and-climate-crises

5. Jamaica Single Window for Trade (JSWIFT). Official platform description and FAQs. JSWIFT provides a single access point for trade-related regulatory submissions and supports connectivity and collaboration among Cross Border Regulatory Agencies and participating government agencies. https://www.jswift.gov.jm/

6. Caribbean Community (CARICOM) (2026). CARICOM Heads, Regional Private Sector Agree Concrete Actions on Affordability, 16 July 2026; and Communique of the Fifty-First Regular Meeting of the Conference of Heads of Government. The sources emphasise coordinated implementation, defined mandates, timelines and measurable outcomes, including arrangements supporting regional maritime transport and mutual recognition. https://caricom.org/caricom-heads-regional-private-sector-agree-concrete-actions-on-affordability/ and https://caricom.org/communique-fifty-first-regular-meeting-of-the-conference-of-heads-of-government-of-the-caribbean-community-caricom-saint-lucia/

7. World Customs Organization (WCO) (2025). Smart Customs Project: Detailed report on the adoption of artificial intelligence and machine learning in Customs. The WCO highlights data management, legal and ethical considerations, interoperability, cybersecurity, workforce capability, fairness, transparency and accountability. https://www.wcoomd.org/en/media/newsroom/2025/march/smart-customs-project-releases-a-detailed-report-on-the-adoption-of-ai-ml-in-customs.aspx?p=1

Research cut-off: 10 August 2026. All factual claims in the Gold Edition were checked against the primary institutional sources listed above. Analytical propositions and the BORDER Framework are Walker Meridian interpretations of the evidence and executive experience.

About the Author

Dr. Velma Ricketts Walker, CD, JP is Founder and Chief Executive Officer of Walker Meridian Advisory Limited, an advisory firm focused on governance, responsible AI, trade and border transformation, institutional strengthening and executive leadership. She previously served as Commissioner and Chief Executive Officer of the Jamaica Customs Agency, where she led a wide-ranging modernisation programme spanning trade facilitation, border protection, digital transformation, risk management and institutional reform. Her work now focuses on helping governments, boards and institutions strengthen governance, institutional capability and responsible transformation in increasingly complex operating environments.

Publication Information

Series	Walker Meridian Executive Perspectives
Perspective	No. 1 — The Institutional Advantage
Status	Gold Edition | Approved for Publication | August 2026
Archive reference	WMA-EP-001-2026 | Gold Edition 1.0

The Walker Meridian BORDER Framework is a proprietary analytical framework developed by Walker Meridian Advisory Limited. It is presented in this Perspective as a research-informed framework for executive analysis and institutional assessment; it is not represented as a statistically validated maturity model.

Citation: Walker Meridian Advisory Limited (2026), The Institutional Advantage: Building the Capabilities That Will Define Caribbean Competitiveness, Walker Meridian Executive Perspectives, Perspective No. 1, Gold Edition 1.0.