

# Govt urged to implement policy on high-sugar foods

The civil society alliance established to combat chronic diseases wants the Freundel Stuart administration to formulate a policy on the use of high-sugar foods and drinks in schools, to which the schools must adhere.

The Healthy Caribbean Coalition (HCC) has complimented the Government for introducing a tax on sweetened beverages, but said the measure did not go far enough.

In his June 15 budget, Minister of Finance Chris Sinckler announced the introduction of a ten per cent excise tax on sweetened beverages, such as carbonated soft drinks, juice drinks, sports drinks and fruit juices, as part of the plan to raise \$200 million in taxes.

However, speaking to members of the media today following the signing of a memorandum of understanding between the HCC and Sagicor Life Inc. at Sagicor's Wildey, St Michael office, Managing Director of the (HCC) Maisha Hutton said the authorities must move on from there and create a national school policy, as well as undertake an intense awareness campaign to influence parents' behaviour.

"Data has shown that the childhood obesity rates are off the charts now and it is becoming a huge problem because children are now prone to hypertension and diabetes at younger ages," Hutton said.

"We can tax sugar sweetened beverages but if they are still being served in schools and they are still being made available to children, if mothers are still buying them or people are still buying them, then there is still a problem. So we need to deal with the environment," she added.

The HCC head recommended that a national school policies should facilitate supportive environments for children so they can make the right choices, noting that there were countries with a "water only" policy in schools, while others barred the use of vending machines.



From left, Chief Operating Officer of Sagicor Life Inc. Edward Clarke, President of the HCC Professor Sir Trevor Hassell and Managing Director of HCC Maisha Hutton.

She said the River Road, St Michael coalition had engaged in discussions with beverage and food manufacturers in the region, stressing the need to reduce the level of sugar and salt in their products.

"I think increasingly these manufacturers are becoming aware that there is going to be a growing demand from the public for healthier options, and increasingly, there is going to be pressure aimed towards government to institute policies and regulations which impact the products they produce. So they are poised and ready," she explained.

Noting that the demand for the beverages with less sugar should be coming from all sections of society, Hutton said the coalition was targeting mothers "to talk to their children,

teachers [and] the Ministry of Education to demand healthier food for their children, whether it is the supermarket they go to, at the school or the products they buy".

She revealed that the coalition wrote to Caribbean Community (CARICOM) heads of government during their meeting here last week, urging them to follow Barbados' example and impose taxes on drinks with high sugar content.

The MOU between the HCC and Sagicor, which will be effective for three years, will see the insurance company providing financial assistance to the secretariat in its fight against chronic non-communicable diseases. The first MOU was signed three years ago and expired this year. (MM)



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