

Curbing the Non-communicable disease epidemic in the Caribbean.

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The epidemic of chronic non-communicable diseases (NCDs) in the Caribbean is one in which a group of diseases, namely, cardiovascular diseases (heart disease and stroke), diabetes, cancers and chronic lung disease account for 65% of the burden of disease in the Region. This group of diseases is influenced by lifestyle, medical care delivery, environment and heredity. They occur as a consequence of unhealthy diet, exposure to tobacco smoke, abuse of alcohol and inadequate physical activity, resulting in, and associated with, physiological derangements of elevated blood pressure, obesity, high blood sugar and abnormal serum lipids.

Several declarations, statements and strategic plans have been produced, both regionally and internationally, aimed at informing of the significant health and developmental impact of NCDs and charting a way forward for tackling them globally, regionally and nationally. In the Caribbean these efforts reached their zenith in 2007 when Heads of Government of CARICOM held a Summit in Port of Spain on NCDs at the conclusion of which the *“Declaration of Port of Spain: Uniting the Stop the Epidemic of NCDs”* was issued as a series of recommendations aimed at reducing the burden of NCDs by comprehensive and integrated preventive and control strategies through multi-sectoral, collaborative approaches in the region. This seminal event was followed by and in many respects was the catalyst for several global and regional consultations and conferences, including the United Nations High Level Meeting on NCDs, 2011 and the subsequent Political Declaration that show agreement on a way forward in responding to the epidemic of NCDs

A review of the strategic plans and declarations arising out meetings and consultations held globally and regionally, reveals that several agreed essential approaches are recommended in response to the epidemic of NCDs. These include the need to effectively address the lifestyle risk factors that contribute to the NCDs particularly by taking such actions as population salt reduction to lower blood pressure; enactment of legislation to forbid smoking in public places, ban advertising and promotion of tobacco products, prohibition of the sale of cigarettes to minors, and increased taxes and duties on tobacco products; policies for responsible drinking of alcohol, and dietary improvement with reduction of intake of saturated fats and zero consumption of trans-fats. A further recommendation is the adoption of a *“health in all policies”* and a *“whole of society”* approach, recognising that many of the required corrective measures are outside the realm and purview of health. A *“whole of society”* strategy would see the active engagement and participation of all sectors of the society in the process, including civil society and the private sector. Common to the several consultations, declarations and strategic plans is the recognition of the need for universal access to health care, improved management of NCDs and the reorientation of health services with application of the chronic care model. Finally, there is recognition of the causative role of certain factors, including lack of education, poor socio-economic conditions, lack of empowerment, vulnerable people, the so-called *“causes of the causes”* that need to be addressed in the response to the NCDs.

The NCDs present a major health and development burden for the Caribbean and as expressed by a Leader of the Caribbean some years ago *“unless they are effectively tackled all the gains made since independence in many Caribbean countries will be reversed”*.