

A CIVIL SOCIETY REPORT ON

NATIONAL NCD COMMISSIONS IN THE CARIBBEAN

Towards a more Effective Multisectoral Response to NCDs

Part I



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The recommendation for the establishment of a National Multisectoral Committee to oversee the development or strengthening of national policies, plans and programme was first mooted in the Non-Communicable Disease Prevention and Control Strategic Plan for the Caribbean Region 2003-2007.

Endorsement of the multisectoral response to prevention and control of NCDs was subsequently expressed in 2007 in the Heads of Government of CARICOM historic Port of Spain Declaration “Uniting to Stop the Epidemic of Chronic Non-Communicable Diseases”, and National NCD Commissions or analogous bodies were determined to be the mechanism or instrument for implementation of the multisectoral response:

...“strongly encourage the establishment of National Commissions on NCDs or analogous bodies to plan and coordinate the comprehensive prevention and control of chronic NCDs”.

The multisectoral approach to NCDs was supported and subsequently echoed in the Political Declaration following the 2011 United Nations High Level Meeting (UNHLM) on NCDs, and at the 67th General Assembly of the WHA in a “Note by the Secretary-General transmitting the report of the Director-General of the WHO on options for strengthening and facilitating multisectoral action for the prevention and control of non-communicable diseases through effective partnership”.

At the United Nations NCD Review meeting in 2014, a multisectoral approach was explicitly recommended and the creation of NCD commissions endorsed. The resulting statement defined an NCD commission as:

“...a high-level commission, agency or task force for engagement, policy coherence and mutual accountability ... to implement health-in-all-policies and whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches, and to monitor and act on the determinants of non-communicable diseases, including social and environmental determinants”.

Following the Port-of-Spain Declaration, many governments in the Caribbean that had not already done so, established National NCD Commissions as vehicles for multisectorality in the national response to NCDs. These commissions are expected to lead the coordination of strategies to combat NCDs and to provide a mechanism that realizes commitments of Governments to engage with the private sector and civil society for the prevention and control of NCDs – the whole of society response.

The “whole of Government” response requires a parallel process, with the formation of an Inter-Ministerial NCD Task Force or equivalent. The role of the NCD Commission in this regard should be to identify, present and evaluate issues to be addressed by the “whole of Government” Inter Ministerial Task Force.

This report provides a detailed assessment and analysis of the status of CARICOM National NCD Commissions and makes recommendations for their future structure and roles as key instruments of national coordinated multisectoral action, based on varying country contexts and realities. The report represents civil society’s contribution to strengthening the multisectoral approach and will be used by the HCC to advocate for, and support National NCD Commissions in CARICOM and beyond.

This report is Part I of a 2-part series. Part II: ‘A Framework for the Establishment and Strengthening of National NCD Commissions’, provides a roadmap for the operationalisation of National NCD Commissions in the Caribbean based on the findings and recommendations found within this report.

MAIN REPORT FINDINGS

Overall there has been a variable response among countries to the call from Heads of Government of CARICOM to establish NCD Commissions as mechanisms for multisectoral prevention and control of NCDs at the national level. Countries with larger populations have generally made greater progress in establishing commissions than those with smaller populations; nevertheless in all countries there has been increased multisectoral activity whether or not led by NCD Commissions. All commissions were noted to be multisectoral in composition, and included the private sector with however little evidence of mechanisms considered and applied to address conflict of interest issues. Commissions reported inadequate human and financial resources for effective functioning. They often lack the necessary resources to determine mandates and to develop and implement strategic action plans to achieve their objectives. Few countries have devised a method of appointment of National NCD Commissions that avoided significant interruptions of functioning of its Commission with changing political circumstance. It was also noted that no mechanism exists for Commissions to interact with each other to mutual advantage.

The challenges of National NCD Commissions in the Caribbean include:

- Inadequate resources.
- Insufficient technical assistance.
- Lack of clear direction.
- Weak methods of appointments.

Barriers to the implementation of the multi-sector, ‘whole of society’ approach have arisen due to the lack of appreciation of respective roles and functions of the membership. Further, although these Commissions were meant to serve as platforms for the realisation of truly ‘Whole of Society response to the NCD epidemic, it is now evident that there needs to be an Inter Ministerial Task Force or equivalent in which all sectors of government are truly engaged thus creating a fertile environment for health in all policies in a whole of government response. However this has not been achieved to any significant extent with exception of a few territories. Defining relationships between National NCD Commissions and Ministries

of Health has been complex and sometimes cumbersome often raising questions of roles and responsibilities and highlighting the lack of autonomy and implementation ‘clout’ of these bodies. There have been challenges in monitoring and evaluating, and sharing information both within and among sectors, and consequently little evidence of translation of knowledge and policies into behaviour change.

“We do well in developing policies and strategic plans, but we are very unimpressive in migrating from plan to programme... more attention needs to be paid to a kind of implementation science – a way of breaking down why these things never get translated into evaluable programmes.”

- Dr. Omowale Amuleru-Marshall, Chair, NCD Commission, Grenada.

Since the Port of Spain Heads of Government of CARICOM Summit on NCDs there have been many successes in the implementation of programmes and policies aimed at tackling NCDs attributed wholly or in part to National NCD Commissions. Regionally, these bodies have supported ratification of the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) in 14/15 countries with full CARICOM membership. The National NCD Commission in Barbados led a national nutrition improvement and population salt reduction campaign. ‘Well Bermuda’, a National NCD Commission equivalent, has successfully engaged multiple sectors using health promotion strategies, with several memoranda of understanding (MOUs) signed between the Ministry of Health and lead agencies and 15/18 action plans implemented. The British Virgin Islands (BVI) has signed an MOU between the Ministry of Health & Social Development and the Ministry of Education & Culture, and has launched an ongoing national ‘Run/Walk’ programme. There is a general sense that National NCD Commissions have contributed within countries to greater awareness of NCDs, and to a multisectoral response to them. NCD Commissions have the potential to be powerful mechanisms of multisectoral action, fostering multistakeholder partnerships, which inform and support effective evidence informed NCD policies and programmes. However there is overwhelming consensus on the need to provide guidance for the successful establishment and operationalisation of these Commissions, coupled with dedicated technical support and strong political leadership both at the country and regional levels.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

Based on the foregoing it is recommended that the following actions be taken nationally and regionally where appropriate:

Governance & Management

- The governance, structure, role and functioning of National NCD Commissions should be outlined in their terms of reference and reflect their overarching purpose which is that of a mechanism for effective multisectoral action in prevention and control of NCDs at the national level.

- The recommended form of appointment of National NCD Commissions is that in which the National NCD Commission is legislated by Government, the length of appointment is unrelated to local political cycle or party, terms of reference are clear and the Commission is provided with a secretariat and appropriate funding commensurate with the mandate of the Commission.

- NCD Units should be established in Ministries of Health to support the work of NCD Commissions.

- The issue of conflict of interest between sectors of NCD Commissions should be addressed in a transparent manner informed by the recognised and established international norms and practices.

- The tobacco, alcohol and firearms industries must not be represented on National NCD Commissions in keeping with the position taken by the international public health community and governments.

- In countries with small populations, consideration should be given to inclusion of representatives of HIV/AIDS, Mental Health and possibly other NCD-related programmes and entities in a broader based National Health & Wellness Commission or National Alliance For Health Action.

- Countries of the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) should consider the possibility of establishing an OECS NCD Commission with NCD Sub-Committees of the Commission established at country level.

- A Regional Secretariat for NCD Commissions, comprising members of the Pan-American Health Organisation (PAHO), CARICOM Secretariat, the Caribbean Public Health Agency (CARPHA), the University of the West Indies (UWI) and the Healthy Caribbean Coalition (HCC) should be established to provide technical assistance and support to National NCD Commissions.

- National NCD Commission chairpersons should be independently minded and functioning and recognized national figures with the professional background and experience needed to interact effectively at the highest level with all sectors of society.

- Recognising the need for not only an effective multisectoral response to NCDs but also one in which there is a ‘health in all policies’ approach, it is recommended that, where feasible, countries should establish NCD inter-ministerial commissions or equivalents (with defined terms of reference, and independent processes for accountability and reporting), to complement the work of National NCD Commissions.

- National NCD Commissions of CARICOM should network among themselves; share best practice and seek representation at national, regional and international conferences for NCD prevention and control.

- National NCD Commissions should have linkages with and access to research facilities that can assist in informing actions and contribute to the assessment of outcomes of actions taken by the National NCD Commission.

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Membership & Personnel

- The appointment of members of National NCD Commissions should be undertaken in a transparent manner and reflect multisectoral interests. The commissions should have wide and strong representation of non-health government ministries, civil society and the private sector.
- The requirements of membership of the National NCD Commission should be determined and made known at the time of appointment of commissioners so as to indicate level of responsibility required.
- The Commission should be provided with a secretariat and appropriate funding commensurate with the mandate of the Commission.
- The professional and technical staff of the Ministry of Health should be ex officio members of the Commission.
- Dedicated technical and professional staff should be provided to facilitate functioning of the Commission.

Functions, Operations & Interventions

- The specific functions of National NCD Commissions should reflect their overall role, which is to drive the multisectoral response in the prevention and control of NCDs at the national level.
- A National NCD Strategic Plan should guide the functions of the commission along with a National Action Plan produced by the commission together with the Ministry of Health.
- The functions of the National NCD Commissions should:
 - Contribute to, and lead as needed, in the production of National NCD Strategic Plans and the implementation of their action plans.
 - Assist government in realising its commitments to engagement with all segments of civil society, non-health ministries, and with the private sector, including conflict of interest challenges, to prevent and control NCDs.
 - Aim to assist in building capacity in the response to NCDs among the sectors of society but especially among private sector and civil society
 - Identify and advocate for implementation of Government policies

that result in reduced NCD risk e.g. subsidies for unhealthy food and drink, recognise the critical role of improved prevention, control and management of NCDs, screening and access to, and delivery of quality care. They should not restrict themselves to risk factor reduction but should also seek to advocate for and promote the chronic care model to address the needs of those living with NCDs.

- Consider advocating for chronic care for all chronic diseases – non-communicable and infectious e.g. HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis.
- Recommend advocacy for strengthened regional cooperation and institutions to support countries.
- In the instance where the NNCD is not responsible for development of the National NCD Plan, the National NCD Commissions should evaluate the National NCD plans with a view to contributing to implementation.
- The operations for NNCDs as contained within the Terms of Reference should include:
 - Meetings of National NCD Commissions should be held regularly at pre-arranged and agreed frequency and times.
 - Records and confirmed minutes of meetings should be provided to the Minister of Health routinely following each meeting within an agreed period of time.
 - The National NCD Commission recommendations should be transmitted to the Minister of Health and/or Head of Government with clear recommendations and deliverables expected from non-Health Ministries and agencies, with budget and accountability features.
 - A formal mechanism should be implemented to allow for routine interaction between the Minister of Health and the members of the NCD Commission.
 - The Chair of the Commission should have direct access to the Minister of Health.

Funding

1. Governments need to provide funding for National NCD Commissions.
2. As recommended in the mandate of the Port of Spain Declaration, revenue from the increased taxation of tobacco and alcohol products should be used to support National NCD Commissions.

This executive summary forms part of a larger report on National NCD Commissions produced by the Healthy Caribbean Coalition. The full report can be found here: <http://bit.ly/HCC-NCD-Commissions-Report>. For more information about the the HCC contact us at hcc@healthycaribbean.org or visit our website at www.healthycaribbean.org.