



NCD Advocacy, Accountability, and Conflict of Interest Meeting
February 17-18th, 2017 Jolly Beach Resort & Spa, Antigua

George A. O. Alleyne
Chancellor
The University of the West Indies
February 17, 2017

The role of civil society as advocates and watchdogs in
NCD prevention and control in the Caribbean
St. Johns, Antigua and Barbuda*

First, let me thank the Minister for his presentation and outlining in such detail the magnitude and gravity of the problem locally, regionally and globally. I wish to address the topic against the background of my personal understanding of the title which can legitimize any courses of action I may suggest. Aristotle said man is a social animal and anyone who does not partake in society is either a beast or a God. We have neither here of course. The participation in society has given rise to the concept and reality of citizenship and civil responsibilities. Citizens are part of some defined political entity and one of the ways they exercise that responsibility is through civil society organizations. The activist view of civil society is that it is a mechanism for manifesting the will and interests of citizens in their relationship to the political entity to which they belong. Gatherings such as this meeting are now part of a universal movement towards organized citizen participation in national affairs. Our elected democracies give authority to a specific group of persons at intervals since direct citizen participation in government became impossible. Citizens are finding that they wish to express themselves irrespective of these fixed periods that are a characteristic of our modern democracies. Their concerns overlap government terms. This has not always been free of friction. My experience in some countries of our region is that governments sometimes regard these citizen's associations or civil society as a form of political opposition and a threat to the democratic process. Indeed, we have seen civil society participating

* Presented at the Healthy Caribbean Coalition Advocacy, Accountability and Conflict of Interest Meeting, Antigua, 17 February, 2017

actively in antigovernment movements, most noticeably when governments are most authoritarian. But in our case here, our focus is on exerting influence and not on wielding executive power.

Citizen groupings are also realizing that there is a role in intermediating between the government and the private sector as the other two formal parts of the modern pluralist state. The roles and functions of government and the private sector are clear and more and more it is being accepted that this third space must be filled. This is now the major focus of civil society organizations all over the world. The current situation is that there is a plethora of institutions and organizations which occupy this third space. There are thematic groups and groupings based on affiliation such as academia, guilds, faith-based organizations and many others.

But today we are here because we belong to one specific thematic grouping which dedicates itself to the prevention and control of NCD's. I should hope that all of you know this history but for completeness I will refer to it briefly. This grouping around the prevention and control of NCD's in the Caribbean was preceded by a rich history of civil society organizations dedicated to one or other NCD, often with a major focus on service. The Port- of - Spain Summit of 2007 on the prevention and control of NCD's was a major political, watershed event and the emanating Declaration made specific reference to the role of civil society to which I will refer later. I should mention that the Healthy Caribbean Coalition preceded the Summit. In the lead-up to the United Nations high level meeting of 2011, civil society in essence organized through the NCD Alliance, played a major role in advocating for that meeting and made significant input into the final declaration which referred to the contribution and important role played by all stakeholders which included civil society. I spoke at the civil society interactive hearing that preceded the UN meeting and I quoted the Secretary-General of the UN who had emphasized that global leadership demanded a new constellation of international cooperation – governments, civil society and the private sector working together for the collective good and I suggested that the collective good in question was the prevention and control of NCD's as a matter of social justice. I believe that the civil society organizations dedicated to prevention and control of NCD's are examples of social justice activism. I have always contended that civil society cannot function effectively – at least in the case of NCD's in the absence of the government and public sectors. The presence and conscience of civil society and the roles of government are complementary and I view the relationship with the private sector in a similar light.

The NCD Alliance with which the HCC is affiliated, bases its work on four strategic pillars for action. These are advocacy, accountability, capacity development and knowledge exchange. You have decided to add conflict of interest as one of the areas that must quite properly engage civil society.

Now, what is advocacy in the context of NCD prevention and control? You may define advocacy as the set of activities by an individual or group that aims to influence decisions within social systems. The essential word here is influence. An advocate by definition cannot execute change and in the Caribbean context we should examine first who are the persons or loci of power

whose decisions we wish to change, then what are the approaches and tools that may facilitate such change and eventually we must know if that change has taken place and what impact it has had.

The first logical reaction to that sequence is that it is the government policies we wish to change. In the Caribbean, as is the case elsewhere, it is our elected governments that have the major if not the sole power to influence the prevalence of the risk factors for NCD's. They pull the major levers with respect to tobacco, alcohol, diet and physical activity and there is general agreement that there can be major changes in these if government exercises the major instruments it has at its control – regulation, taxation and legislation. Governments have the power and the tools to create a smoke-free Caribbean. Governments have the power and tools to ensure that our children consume less sugar and thus put a brake on the epidemic of childhood obesity. Civil society should ask why government does not use these tools.

But government does not have a single face particularly in our democratic systems so advocacy must be targeted not only to government as a whole but to those instances and those individuals in government that are likely to wield most influence. Thus, for example the Ministers of finance, health and commerce are likely to be the key persons to be influenced if we wish to see the taxes on sugar sweetened beverages increased. Many of you have heard me refer before to the difficulty in achieving a whole of government approach to action in relation to NCD's and I still maintain that the nature of our elective politics makes inter-ministerial cooperation extremely difficult. But in addition to policy makers, there are “influencers” who are often more accessible and can sometimes be powerful shapers of policy. I am proposing the creation of a category of NCD Champions in the Caribbean who can be among your influencers.

We must also consider the tools that are available. It is easy to say that information and communication are essential, but the type of information and the form of communication must vary according to the targets. The most powerful communication is a direct one to the policymaker and there is no substitute for direct communication with the appropriate minister or ministers. But I have always insisted that such communication must be carefully planned and well presented and since these encounters are not frequent and often very short, there must be a specific request with clear evidence to support it and indication of its technical feasibility, social desirability and if possible, political practicality. I have often heard ministers and senior officials say that they are approached by an activist but at the end of the brief interview he or she is not clear about what is being asked. So please be specific about the “ask”.

The media represent another well-respected advocacy channel as we all know, but I'm sometimes distressed by the generality of the information and the lack of the supporting evidence in our media. Few if any media houses in the Caribbean have health specialists and it is a part of the advocacy effort to help to prepare the material to be presented. Advocacy also involves raising public awareness of the magnitude of the problem of NCDs and I contend that information to the public and the policymakers as well, must appeal not only to the pocket, that is the economic

aspect, not only must the information be presented in terms of core statistics but the human story must always be told. There is no substitute for human interest stories and indeed, there is no shortage of such in the Caribbean with relation to NCD's, but one of the strengths of human interest stories is that there must be specific to the locale. We must not forget that one of the most powerful tools of advocacy is the voice of the persons affected directly or indirectly, as was shown in the case of HIV. Civil society must overcome the apparent reluctance to present the human suffering caused by NCD's in the region and must make a deliberate effort to direct advocacy to and with persons with NCDs. The Caribbean is fortunate that there is not that distance between the policy makers and civil society that exists in some countries. In addition, your organizations and particularly the HCC have the credibility and legitimacy that facilitates access. There is a wealth of evidence available on which appropriate communication can be based.

I am not equipped to speak of the power of the social media but especially after experiencing its impact in recent international politics, I am now convinced of its power to shape minds and hearts. I used to think that this was a medium of the youth but obviously, it is not so anymore. The art of conveying critical information or disinformation in 140 characters is apparently a skill that can be acquired at any age.

I hope you allow me to speak of accountability instead of being a watch dog. Accountability represents the obligation for one to account to another for fulfillment of commitments made or activities carried out and be transparent in the disclosure of the results. Thus, there must be a body that renders account and one to which the account is rendered. It is the citizenry – the public – that is the body to which government should give account. Government makes a commitment to various policies which it must implement and there has to be an independent body to verify that there are results of the implementation of those policies. Civil society in effect has two roles. As a part of the citizenry, it is a part of that body to which government must give an account of the implementation of policies and the results. But civil society organizations also have the responsibility of seeing that the account is rendered and verifying the results. Civil society can only hold the government to account if there is clarity about the commitments and transparency about the results. The difficulty frequently lies in getting the results of the commitments independently verified. One cannot separate advocacy from accountability in the sense that civil society has to advocate for the implementation of the policy and also for a means of verifying whether the expected results materialized. The Caribbean heads of government made specific commitments 10 years ago in Port-of-Spain. The careful analysis of what has happened since then must be the basis of an accountability exercise. It is incumbent on civil society to point out where the commitments were met and where there are gaps. While it is not a matter of naming to shame, the public has a right to know whether the commitments made have been kept.

It is critical to appreciate that it is not only government that must be a target of advocacy. The captains of industry are not immune to properly focused advocacy, although experience shows

that they are most likely to change when public opinion is so swayed that the business is affected or to be blunt, when the profits are affected.

Thus, in sum, I see the roles of civil society organizations as advocacy for the commitment, advocacy for the policies to be carried out, monitoring of compliance, verification of the outputs and outcomes, and dissemination of information to the various publics.

How do I relate this to the Caribbean? There are two aspects of advocacy and accountability that relate to the Caribbean situation. First there is the appreciation of the role of civil society. The Heads of Government were convinced that the burden of NCD's could only be reduced by comprehensive and integrated preventive and control strategies through collaborative programmatic partnerships supported by a wide range of actors, among whom there was specific mention of nongovernmental organizations and other social regional and international partners.

Over the past 10 years there has been advocacy at various levels by various actors and through various media in the region, trying to influence governments to put in place the mechanisms to achieve their commitments made in Port-of-Spain. Finally, the University of the West Indies and a group of partners has evaluated the degree of achievement and I trust that the civil society organizations here will join in bringing this evaluation to the highest political levels in the region in an effort to have full implementation of the declaration. But the question arises as to how there can be the best advocacy for regional commitments and whether there is an account holder to whom account should be rendered as regards the delivery of those commitments and their results. Although the Port of Spain Declaration was a collective commitment – it began with “We the Heads of Government” – there is no mechanism for ensuring that there is the same collectivity in the accountability and the execution. There is no regional governance mechanism in the Caribbean to ensure compliance with regional commitments.

Herein lies the role of the regional entities such as the Healthy Caribbean Coalition, CARPHA and the University of the West Indies. There is a role for providing evidence to the policymakers when they meet as a group of the degree of compliance or non-compliance and exhorting them to take the necessary action at the individual country level. This presentation to the group as a whole may have the unintended consequence of stimulating some competition among them as no one country wishes to be seen as a laggard. There is a role for informing the Caribbean public as a whole and stimulating it to ask for accountability nationally. In this case, it may be necessary to disaggregate the data so as to focus on the national achievements in relationship to the regional commitments. Finally, there is a role for sensitizing and empowering the national civil society organizations through coaching and providing local specific data so that they make the appropriate de marches on their national governments. I would propose that this three-pronged approach is one way through which advocacy and accountability might contribute to the prevention and control of NCD's in the Caribbean through actions of civil society organizations.

Can you do all that I have suggested? Yes, you can!!

Let me wish you a successful meeting.