



GOVERNMENT OF BARBADOS

FEATURE ADDRESS

BY

**HON. DAVID THOMPSON, M.P
PRIME MINISTER OF BARBADOS**

AT

**CARIBBEAN CONFERENCE
ON
CHRONIC NON-COMMUNICABLE DISEASES**

*"A Healthy Caribbean 2008 – A Wellness
Revolution Conference"*

Thank you for inviting me as the Prime Minister of Barbados and the Head of Government with lead responsibility for the establishment of the CARICOM Single Market and Economy to welcome you to this Conference on Chronic Non-Communicable Diseases (CNCD's).

I understand the stakeholders ranging from the Pan American Health Organization, the Inter American Heart Foundation, CARICOM Governments and several Caribbean Non-Governmental Organizations have responded to the call to be here.

I also thank and congratulate our Heart and Stroke Foundation of Barbados Inc. for taking a leadership role in organizing this Conference.

The Foundation has given 23 years of excellent service in highlighting the dangers that heart disease and other chronic non-communicable diseases pose to our development. This is a time bomb which has been ticking away for decades.

Today, the Foundation's untiring efforts and the enormous sacrifices its members have made have been vindicated. The prevention and treatment of chronic non-communicable diseases placed at the top of the national and regional priority list.

I salute the Foundation as an exemplary Non-Governmental Organization whose members recognize the need to give something back to their community.

I crave this Conference's indulgence to seize this opportunity to publicly thank the first President of the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Barbados, Professor Trevor Hassell and the second President "Dru" Symmonds - who has just retired after 13 years of sterling service.

New President Dr. Stephen Moe has two enormous sets of shoes to fill!

Let us not underestimate the importance of this Civil Society Conference. For me, it does two things. One is that it clearly demonstrates the need for Partnerships, particularly with organizations that embrace and represent the people.

If we want to bring about lasting social change, we have to mobilize our people. And there is no better way to do this than to seek the participation and win the support of civil society organizations.

The second point is that it shows beyond a shadow of a doubt that the best means of bringing about regional integration is by mobilizing the people around common interests and common threats – one of the biggest being the high incidence of Chronic Non-Communicable Diseases (CNCD's) such as obesity, hypertension, high blood pressure, diabetes, stroke, heart attack and cancer.

Heads of Government of CARICOM held a Special Summit in Trinidad last year. The statistics revealed before and during the Summit were shocking. Dr. the Hon. Denzil Douglas, the Prime Minister of St. Kitts and Nevis, who has lead responsibility for Health in the Quasi-Cabinet of CARICOM Heads of Government, said that chronic diseases had become ***“the poor world’s greatest health problem”***.

He further revealed that the incidence of CNCD’s in the Caribbean region was the highest in the Americas!

In 2005, according to figures from the World Health Organization, heart disease, cancer, diabetes, and other CNCD’s accounted for over 60% of all deaths in the region, compared with 29.2% from infectious diseases, such as HIV/AIDS, and 9.3% from injuries.

While the popular media were pre-occupied with violent deaths and the HIV/AIDS pandemic, CNCD's were becoming mass killers.

The economic implications of the CNCD pandemic are serious. Take for example the case of Barbados, which is showing patterns that are very similar to those in other CARICOM jurisdictions. In 2001 the prevalence of diabetes among adults was 16.4%. Total amputations at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital between 2002 and 2006 were 995 for diabetics and 230 for non-diabetics.

The estimated cost related to diabetes in Barbados in 2001 was US\$37.8 and hypertension US\$72.7. These costs alone accounted to over 5% of the island's Gross Domestic Product.

Interestingly, the incidence of diabetes in Haiti, the poorest country in the Western hemisphere was found to be 7.3%.

The correlation between increases in CNCD's and rising standards of living seems to suggest that if left to chance, all the gains achieved by countries of the Caribbean during the march from poverty to relative affluence since Independence can be wiped out by CNCD's.

The irony is that since all CNCD's are lifestyle diseases, they are preventable. They have a causal relationship to:

- Physical Inactivity
- Unhealthy Diet
- Tobacco Use
- Alcohol Abuse
- Stress

There are two factors emerging from the study of this pandemic which should cause us concern. One is the growing incidence of CNCD's among children.

The Heart and Stroke Foundation of Barbados has been reporting an increasing number of cases of stroke among children. Similarly, the incidence of obesity among children is highly visible on our streets.

Most recently, Dr. Colin Alert, the Team Doctor for the Commonwealth Youth Games sounded the alarm about CNCD'seven among young athletes! That is not news to me because this startling revelation was made to me many years ago by my wife Mara who trained and spent many years as Physical Education Teacher and Coach.

The second cause for concern is the close association between stress and CNCD's. People in

high status jobs working to deadlines in an environment where failure is publicly visible are prone to stress. Who could these people be? Politicians, lawyers, Prime Ministers and so on!

It is for these reasons that the CARICOM Summit was called in an effort to stem the epidemic. After careful consideration of the data, the Heads of Government drew up a Declaration to guide future action in preventing and controlling CNCD's.

It was agreed that the best approach was to address the causal risk factors of unhealthy diets, physical inactivity, tobacco use and alcohol abuse and strengthening our health services.

It was further agreed that the most effective response through the individual, family, community,

national and regional levels and collaborative programmes, partnerships and policies supported by governments, private sectors, NGO's and other social, regional and international partners.

The Declaration was very clear on what has to be done and should be used as a guide to action. The checklist includes the establishment of National Commissions on CNCD's, a legislative agenda, the establishment by mid-2008 of comprehensive plans for the screening and management of chronic diseases and risk factors so that by 2012, the re-introduction of physical education in our schools, ensuring that schools promote programmes of healthy eating, promoting increased physical activity in the entire population and among others.

This Declaration acknowledges that all stakeholders have a role to play in solving this social problem. It is essentially about Good Governance.

Basically good governance is too important to be left exclusively to Government.

In Barbados we had the foresight and the good fortune to create a unique mechanism for the voluntary and rational resolution of conflict in the production process. This requires Government, Employers and Workers' Representatives to sit down at regular intervals and rationally discuss pressing issues in an effort to reach consensus.

I am referring to the Social Partnership which was established in the early 1990's. Since then it has served the function not only of preventing industrial conflict, but also to offer a platform for the collective solution to a range of social problems and the joint pursuit of national objectives.

We have tried on several occasions to involve a wider cross-section of civil society organizations in the process but with limited success. Perhaps this

Conference will succeed in getting larger numbers of such organizations to participate in the efforts to prevent CNCD's from further ravaging the Caribbean.

In the meantime I can assure you that my Government will continue to play a leadership role and create the conditions for the success of the regional response to the CNCD pandemic.

You will therefore be pleased to hear that Barbados has been a leader in setting the agenda for the management of CNCD's by being the first English speaking Caribbean country to establish a National Commission for CNCD's.

This Commission has been mandated to formulate sound policies and programmes to address these diseases, with emphasis on prevention. Out of the work of this Commission will come

recommendations for legislation to tackle the threat posed by CNCD's.

The Government of Barbados is firmly committed to responding positively to all the other aspects of the Port of Spain Declaration. This was evidenced in a very tangible way, during the Financial and Budgetary Statement presented in June of this year, through the increase in taxes on tobacco products by 100% and the removal of duty free concessions.

With respect to the promotion of physical activity, the Government of Barbados celebrated Caribbean Wellness Day on 13th September. Broad Street was closed to vehicular traffic and several public activities were conducted related to physical exercise, good nutrition and wellness.

Multiple activities occurred in the same space at the same time, with an underlying theme of promoting healthy lifestyles.

In keeping with our policy of participation, several stakeholders were present in an effort to create synergies. For example the Ministry of Agriculture was there admonishing people to eat locally grown healthy foods. Naturally this would give Barbadian farmers a comparative advantage and give a boost to agriculture.

Similarly the Ministry of Sports was there because of the logical spin-offs for Sports. This is in keeping with our Manifesto promise to make Sports available to all Barbadians.

It was made abundantly clear that this was not just a one-off event. Participants were encouraged to get involved in or create continuous programmes of physical activities. Tentative plans for a “**Barbados Wellness Day at the Beach**” were revealed.

This event is part of a strategy to draw attention to the fact that Barbados has more sea than land and

that we cannot afford to continue living in fear of this resource or ignoring it.

If we continue to treat our maritime environment in this way we would be encouraging pollution and condemning dozens of young people to death each year simply because they never learned to swim.

Moreover, I believe that it is only when we become aware of the ***Caribbean Sea as a bridge and not a barrier*** that true regional integration will begin. I feel very strongly about this. We must teach our people to appreciate the Caribbean Sea as an extension of our small islands and the gateway to our future.

The first step in this direction is to understand that spending time at the beach swimming – once we can get to it - is good for our personal health.

There is also the need for private sector organizations to make a direct contribution to the campaign for developing healthy lifestyles among

their workers. People spend most of their waking hours at work.

Enlightened employers in the developed countries of the world are renowned for meeting the health needs of their employees at the workplace. Gymnasias and other recreational facilities are often provided. Companies like Cadbury's in the UK and most Japanese conglomerates readily come to mind. Quality inputs into the human resources at the workplace invariably result in improved outputs.

However, I am convinced that the people of Barbados and the other member states of the Caribbean are best empowered to solve their own problems through Civil Society Organizations.

I know from bitter experience as a founder member of several community-based organizations, including

“Families First”, that voluntary community organizations are less effective and less efficient than expected, simply because of their isolation from the corridors of power.

Despite having the best intentions they just haven't got the capacity to deliver. Communities throughout the region are littered with the bones of voluntary organizations that emerged with idealistic zeal but soon wither and die for lack of resources.

If Civil Society Organizations are to succeed and bring to the attention of Governments the needs of vulnerable groups and the new needs of categories of people like returning nationals or those who have taken early retirement, then they must be fully resourced and have a direct channel of communication with Government.

I believe that this response to the CNCD pandemic runs the risk of failure unless Civil Society Organizations throughout the region are empowered.

This is the challenge I want to lay down to my counterpart political leaders across the region.

In Barbados we have agonized over this challenge, particularly during the long years when my Party was in the political wilderness.

Hence we are currently experimenting with Constituency Councils as a means of addressing the issue of empowering people in communities. If you consider constituencies as comparable collections of actual or potential communities, then you can see why we are focussing on constituencies and not communities or parishes.

Government is committed to establishing a Constituency Council in each of the 30 constituencies in Barbados.

Members of these Councils will be drawn from local community organizations. Representation will be provided for:

- (i) Faith Based Organizations
- (ii) Political Parties with representation in the House of Assembly
- (iii) Emergency Management Organizations
- (iv) Youth Organizations
- (v) Sports Organizations
- (vi) Seniors Clubs/Retired Persons' Organizations
- (vii) Women's Organizations
- (viii) Men's Organizations
- (ix) Recognized Community Leaders

These Constituency Councils will act as the link between Government and the people by offering a channel of communication between the people and Parliament.

Along this two-way channel will flow information and other resources necessary for solving problems at

the level at which they emerge including how best to respond to the CNCD pandemic.

I sincerely hope that the Action Plan which you draw up during this Conference will lead to the Wellness Revolution that is so desperately needed in the Caribbean.

I wish you well in your deliberations and I look forward to the outputs from this Conference.

I hereby formally declare this Conference Open.