



**OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT
REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO**

HER EXCELLENCY REEMA CARMONA, FIRST LADY OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

“Childhood Obesity- A Development Time-bomb: Learning from SIDS to accelerate multi-sectoral action in support of the 2025 NCDs targets and the SDGs”

On the Occasion of the 72nd Regular Session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA),
Trusteeship Council Chamber, UN Headquarters, New York, USA.

1.15pm- 2.30pm, 22 September 2017

Senator The Honourable Maxine McClean, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade, Barbados

Senator the Honourable Kamina Johnson Smith, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade, Jamaica

The Honourable Elvin Nimrod, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Grenada

The Honourable Ginette Petitpas Taylor, Minister of Health, Canada

Dr. Tedros Ghebreyesus, Director General, World Health Organisation (WHO)

Dr. Colin Tukuitonga, Director General, Secretariat of the Pacific Community

Sir George Alleyne, Director Emeritus, PAHO/WHO

Sir Trevor Hassell, President, Healthy Caribbean Coalition

“Every part of Dominica has received a serious beating- if not by wind, then by water”. Those are the words of Dominican Prime Minister, Roosevelt Skerrit, as he cried for his tiny island, ravaged by Hurricane Maria. Our thoughts, prayers, and best wishes are with our brothers and sisters in Dominica and our other Caribbean neighbours at this difficult time.

As Small Island Developing States (SIDS), we are already vulnerable to the effects of climate change and Mother Nature. In some part, Maria was unpreventable. However, to add NCDs and childhood obesity, which are, for the most part, preventable, to the challenges that we, SIDS,

already face, is **irresponsible**. In the epidemiology of NCDs, unhealthy diets and physical inactivity are **modifiable** behavioral risk factors and high blood pressure and obesity **modifiable** biological risk factors that, quite frankly, require **urgent modification** to treat with this surge of NCDs. These risk factors are highlighted in the Executive Summary of Trinidad and Tobago's 2017-2021 Executive Summary of the 'National Strategic Plan for the Prevention and Control of NCDs'. The first copy of this Summary, which classifies Parkinson's and Alzheimer's as disabilities, was recently presented to His Excellency President Carmona and me, by the Honourable Minister of Health, Mr. Terrence Dyalsingh. Just yesterday, the Diabetes Association of Trinidad and Tobago stated that some 200,000 persons in T&T- an island with a population of 1.3 million- are affected by NCDs. Now, given that reporting and comprehensive data collection may not be at its strongest in the country, it is possible that our NCD prevalence is much higher.

As a strong believer in healthy lifestyles, I use my Good Offices to engage in an advocacy of transformational influence and change with respect to NCDs and childhood obesity. The catalyst for my advocacy begins with the sanctity and preservation of human life. When childhood obesity is factored in, we must think forward to Generation Next and how we can improve the status quo in order to ensure sustainable development in the myriad necessary spheres. That is why I am privileged to be here today, to join forces as we mobilise the efforts necessary, for a health revolution, for our children. We must neither underestimate nor under-appreciate the potential impact of this Conference on world health, regional health and national health. I have to thank the Chairman, Sir George Alleyne, for his remarkable stewardship both as Chancellor of the University of the West Indies for the last 14 years and also as a strong supporter of health associations in the Caribbean, in particular, the Trinidad and Tobago Heart Association, of which I am a Patron. Sir George has led from the front. Do not let his affability deceive you into believing that he is a man of fluff. His advocacy on issues of progressive health has been phenomenal- an ode to my own personal philosophy, that genuine advocacy must be **persistent, consistent and never convenient or opportunistic**.

We need to tell the world at large about the deleterious effects of the Siamese twins- salt and sugar- as we proactively address childhood obesity. For the last 4 years, I have been calling for a culinary revolution in the kitchens of my country and Region to foster wider consumption of fruits

and vegetables; I have been knocking on the corporate conscience of private enterprises to cut the sugar content in sodas and I have been advocating for sugarless drinks and natural juices in the school cafeterias of Trinidad and Tobago. It all finally came to pass when, a few weeks ago, just before the start of the new school term in September, the Ministries banned sodas from all school cafeterias in T&T. One of our largest soda manufacturers, advertised, with pride, just mere months ago, that it was cutting its sugar content by 40%.

Even with these gains however, my advocacy and action will persist for more improvements in policy and every-day living to augment the benefits of healthy lifestyles. I will continue to not only talk the talk but also, run the talk- literally- as I run in support of school marathons, 5ks and 10ks. At the end of this month, His Excellency the President and I will host a reception in commemoration the 10th Anniversary of the Port of Spain Declaration, at which all concerned stakeholders will be invited. We shall also issue a strong statement of support for the objectives and mandate of the Declaration, in which I plan to include some of the robust ideas that I have heard here today, on childhood obesity and NCD control and prevention.

Ladies and gentlemen, in this fight against childhood obesity, we can utilise the **child advocate**- not *persons who advocate on behalf of children*, but rather, the child who becomes an advocate for a cause- such as healthy eating and exercise- in his/her classroom, community, Nation and the world. Also, I would like to suggest that every child on this earth, from primary to secondary school, becomes the recipient of a School Health Certificate, so that that child is made aware of his/her health issues and invariably engage in the required corrective measures.

Childhood obesity is exacerbated by this obsessive “coach potato” environment of playing video games and watching television for long hours. The amount of time spent in watching television or the presence of a television in a child's bedroom are directly related to the prevalence of obesity in children and adolescents. These effects may persist into adulthood. Parents have a responsibility to monitor this type of sedentary consumption of commercialism. Social media and television have impacted our traditional values of eating local or eating ‘green’. It may well be a good thing for advertisements on healthy lifestyles and cuisine to be strategically placed during prime television shows.

We need to strive for food labelling legislation and as well tax breaks on healthy food imports, with higher taxes placed on the unhealthier options. At some point, in fighting to save people from themselves, it became necessary to legislate what we eat. We simply cannot depend on the goodwill of individuals and companies alone to get this health revolution off the ground. We need to reconsider our serving portions in restaurants and even, on the plates of our own kitchens- it is better to reduce the price and reduce the servings rather than increase the price and increase the servings.

As I walk through these very streets of New York, I notice numerous 'healthy supermarkets' and 'green' eateries - perhaps a health revolution is slowly gaining momentum. Indeed, advocacy and change for good are never instant like coffee.

Ladies and gentlemen, I speak of a change in our cultural mindsets as we tackle issues of health. Given that childhood obesity is most certainly a development time-bomb, this notion that we only get sick when we get old, clearly has no basis. NCDs and the health and welfare of our children concern each of us here in this room. I know that we will do the right thing for ourselves, our children and our children's children, as we seek attainment of our own health goals and as well, the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

I thank you.