

Address by  
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**HCC Caribbean NCD Forum- Supporting National Advocacy in Lead up to the 2018 High Level Meeting on NCDs: Towards 25\*25 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**

*Sharing my Experience in Contributing to the NCD Response*

25 April, 2018- Knutsford Court Hotel, Kingston, Jamaica

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*[Salutations]*

It is indeed a privilege to be involved in this progressive regional dialogue that will invariably foster solutions to mitigate this pandemic of NCDs that we are experiencing in the Caribbean Region. What is required of us ALL is a matter of fact, urgent and collaborative response. Ladies and gentlemen, I am a passionate advocate for your stated mission and will continue to support initiatives that will go a long way in alleviating the deleterious impact of Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) on our Caribbean men, women and children. **Genuine advocacy for just causes comes about from a yearning to get things done and make things right- not later, but NOW.** The potency or meritocracy of transformational advocacy must neither be assessed, dimmed nor diluted by considerations of status, rank or class. **This is a fight by all for all.** The fight against NCDs must resonate from the top to ground zero and vice versa.

As First Lady of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, I was able to dialogue with international organisations, NGOs, world leaders, diplomats, the proverbial 'small man', school children, the youth population, corporate society and politicians about pertinent and challenging social and health issues affecting our national, regional and international frailties. My good Office as First Lady of Trinidad and Tobago allowed me to advocate for just and worthy causes on behalf of the weak, the marginalised, the voiceless and Persons with Disabilities. I was and still am in the business of helping to improve the quality of life for ALL. My presence here is a demonstration that my advocacy and action will not be transient, selective or occasional.

I am particularly grateful, to the Healthy Caribbean Coalition (HCC); the World Diabetes Foundation; Sagikor Life Inc. and the wonderful country of Jamaica for supporting this high level Conference. Everyone here is a powerful conduit of influence and can be movers and shakers in

relation to policy implementation and the action necessary for combating the ravages of NCDs in our region.

When my husband Justice Anthony Carmona SC, assumed the Office of the President of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, we were *ad idem*, that in light of the pressing social issues confronting our society, it could not be business as usual. It meant challenging the status quo and the traditional approaches to engaging issues and solutions. We both discussed our individual roles, and one thing that we agreed upon, was that my role was not to walk behind my husband but at his side. I was not going to be an ‘armchair’ First Lady but rather a solution-oriented one and part of a progressive and transformational Presidency.

I recall the SCLAN Conference, in February 2017, in Guyana where I challenged all of us, the First Ladies of the Caribbean, to be forces of real change- within our communities, countries, region and even, on the international stage. One aspect of that change was resiling from the traditional mold **to be seen, rather than be heard, on pressing issues.** I stated, ***“As First Ladies, we must not be seen or perceived to be metaphorically, simply walking behind our husbands, remaining silent and reticent when there are challenging social issues impacting negatively on our girls, women and even our men-folk. Ours must be seen as a female empowerment agenda that is transformational and progressive.”***

Two important features of advocacy are presence and leadership; **a presence that motivates and inspires and leadership that triggers action rather than ‘ole talk”**. As Trinidad and Tobago’s First Lady, I participated in many activities and projects aimed at promoting and accelerating the fight against NCDs. The fight against NCDs for me, is a lived philosophy and this I shared with my country, through a regime of active participation in both competitive and non-competitive athleticism; 5Ks, 10Ks, half-marathons and relay marathons. Before the Presidency, during and now, I continue my daily exercise regime of running around the Queen’s Park Savannah, Port of Spain. As First Lady, I did not only talk the talk, I ran the talk. I meant business.

As Small Island Developing States (SIDS), we must adhere to international standards and best practices concomitant with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and the 2030

Agenda. This veritable roadmap to genuine holistic global development, highlights philosophies of health and wellness- primary concerns of this august Conference. The HCC has specifically identified **Goal 3- Good Health and Wellbeing** as one of the core objectives of this Forum. The 17 SDGs and specifically **Goals 3, 6, 7 and 12** address the need for a healthier society that will invariably lead to a diminution of NCD cases throughout our region and the world.

The solutions in the fight against NCDs are simple, straightforward and some may even say basic. The presenters of this forum have spoken about the need to get back to the basics of healthy food and active lifestyles- not the sedentary type, overpowered by the abuse of technology. **Dr. Owen Gabriel** went a bit further and spoke of our “happiness index” in the context of preventing and controlling NCDs. It certainly begins with healthy eating and a regime of consistent exercise.

Often there is a hue and a cry reverberating through health systems in the Caribbean that hospital beds are in short supply. We do not need more hospital beds and prosthetics. The politicians must move away from this appearance approach of constructing more hospitals as a guise of “visible progress”. What we really need are less diabetics and we would have less amputees. Some 30% of bed space in hospitals are occupied by diabetics alone. This dynamic needs to change and change will come by affirmative action to appreciate that NCDs, in the words of **Dr. James Hospedales**, are a “**GLOBAL HEALTH SECURITY THREAT**”. It must not be lost upon our Caribbean Heads of Government that NCDs must be ranked as a regional and global priority, moreso at the 3<sup>rd</sup> UNHLM on NCDs to be held in September 2018.

The fight against NCDs must not only include our adult population but as well, our children and teenagers. My advocacy against NCDs has always been grounded in inspiring and triggering a culinary revolution not only in the kitchens of my country but in the kitchens of the world. I have been relentless in my attack on the Siamese twins, salt and sugar. As parents, we have a duty and responsibility to our children and families to ensure at all times that the family eats healthy foods. By nurturing a culture of healthy eating habits as a **family norm**, rather than exception, we are ensuring longer, healthier and more sustained quality of life for all.

In the Caribbean Region, our myriad cultural influences are often reflected in the milieu of cuisines, some healthy and some not so healthy and careful attention must be paid when we speak in laudable terms of **'eating local'**. 'Eating local' also means- and I am in Jamaica- balancing the bammy, akee and saltfish in proper portion sizes with local fruits and vegetables.

Childhood Obesity is a pandemic in the Caribbean. Some 35% of Caribbean adolescents are overweight or obese, with the inevitable, evolving trend of our children developing NCDs- hypertension, diabetes, cancer and cardio-vascular diseases in their early years. Indeed, the HCC's campaign **#TOOMUCHJUNK** reports that 1 in 3 of our Caribbean children is overweight or obese. This is nothing short of alarming. If this does not warrant priority attention, I do not know what does.

I have always emphasized that schools play a critical role in arresting this growing health malaise. For years, I have been suggesting that Caribbean schools institutionalize as part of their curriculum compulsory periods of study once a week in primary and secondary schools, dealing exclusively with the benefits of healthy cuisine, diets, drinks and exercise. I am in total agreement with **Professor the Honourable Errol Morrison** that physical education be made compulsory in all of our Caribbean schools. Additionally, there must never be a constriction of recess periods in schools- as almost happened in Trinidad and Tobago- as a mechanism for dealing with student indiscipline.

I firmly believe through such institutionalised compulsive periods of health education and exercise, the child can become an effective advocate against NCDs at school, in the home and in his community. For the last five years, I have been pushing the concept of the Child-Advocate, who among his peers, can be a game-changer, not only on matters of diet, health and exercise, but as well, on those challenging issues of bullying, lack of self-esteem and empowerment. This allows the child to become a watchdog to his or her peers, and even the parents, in ensuring that proper eating habits and healthy lifestyles are adhered to at all times. And of course, we recall the example on Monday of the Jamaican experience of the character "Rosie" who was referred to, by a son to his mother, as the mother was about to indulge in some unhealthy eating.

We must not forget that today's healthy or unhealthy children will be tomorrow's healthy, or God forbids, unhealthy adults.

In the midst of a deafening institutional silence, I continue to advocate that each child should be the recipient of a Health Certificate in pre-school, primary and secondary school throughout the Caribbean Region. Professor Dan Ramdath, one of the region's foremost scientists in Health Nutrition has been the principal proponent of the Child Health Certificate and I am at a complete loss as to why the Caribbean Ministers of Health and Education have not come on board. The Child Health Certificate will allow for the child to become sensitive to personal health issues and with that knowledge, strategies can be devised that would lead to a healthier child, by way of proper diet and exercise.

Public-private partnerships, cooperation and collaboration continue to be critical in the fight against NCDs. Corporate Caribbean must recognize its vested interest in the health and wellbeing of its employees by encouraging employees to lead healthy and active lifestyles. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in the area of health must go beyond the conventional standards of merely purchasing football t-shirts for football teams. Sagicor Inc. has done phenomenal work in this area by leading the charge in healthy lifestyles with its 10,000 steps wellness programme and lending its resources in innovative ways to promote healthy lifestyles.

Consider, for example, and I have put on the table on several occasions, an exemplary initiative of the international oil giant British Petroleum (BP) that can work regionally. A friend who currently works for BP in Houston, Texas showed me a Fit Bit wearable health monitor that he received, compliments of the oil company. For every million recorded steps that he takes, he gets 250 points from a health programme to which he signed up. When he gets 1000 points in the calendar year, he is rewarded with a reduced premium on his health insurance for the following year. He remains healthy with no loss of man hours to the Company and as a result the Company and the Healthcare System benefit. The Caribbean governments should consider giving companies tax breaks for such initiatives. Investment in an employee's health will boost productivity. It's a win/win situation for everyone.

For the past few days I have listened and I feel your sense of frustration at the Caribbean's **implementation deficit**, so aptly highlighted by our distinguished Sir Trevor Hassell, as he and all of us here continue to walk that long road to NCD prevention and control. I beseech you, stay your course and maintain your focus and advocacy against unhealthy lifestyles. Do not be waylaid by Caribbean governmental apathy. Well-grounded advocacy does not always bring instant results. For 4 years as First Lady, I advocated against the consumption of certain drinks served to our children at school cafeterias. I have called for sugarless, natural drinks, pure juices, the drinking of more water and foods without saturated fat, colouring, damaging flavouring and Monosodium Glutamate (MSG). I advocated this in 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016 and finally in 2017, the requisite authorities mandated the ban of sugary drinks in the school cafeterias of Trinidad and Tobago.

On Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> April, we celebrated World Earth Day and it is being recognized that the ravages of Climate Change and Environmental Degradation are inextricably linked to the growth of NCDs. Climate Change is real. Goal 13 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals Agenda calls for **CLIMATE ACTION**. Climate Change has caused increased rainfall in many parts of the world resulting in flooding and thus, the release of carcinogenic chemicals from contaminated water washing through industrial sites or sewage. Cancer in all forms continue to plague our societies. **Dr. James Hospedales** called this interplay, "two sides of the same coin." We must not forget that a warmer climate alters biogeochemical cycles exposing human populations to chemicals that are more volatile or more soluble at higher temperatures. Climate Change continues to threaten global food security, quality and sustainability and inevitably, our health and survival as human beings. This need for an increased food supply may also encourage intensive farming practices resulting in the use of carcinogenic pesticides and preservatives causing further damage to human life.

As part of my committed patronages to those marginalised in our Caribbean societies, Persons with Disabilities have been a prominent concern of mine. In the Caribbean Region, Persons with Disabilities continue to battle with infrastructural and institutional limitations as it relates to mobility and moreso, exercise and physical activity. Persons with Disabilities have very limited means to pursue physically active and healthy lifestyles. They are unable to access savannahs,

gyms and are therefore more prone to NCDs. This is all the result of governmental, institutional and societal indifference and insensitivity. As First Lady, I have advocated and will continue to advocate consistently that our Caribbean leaders declare a Caribbean Decade for Persons with Disabilities 2018 – 2028, following the UN Decade for Disabled Persons 1983 - 1992 and the African Decade for Disabled Persons 1999-2009. It will encourage behavioural changes in the private and public sectors of our society, trigger implementable policies and initiatives, integrating comprehensively, Persons with Disabilities, so they can lead healthier lives and enjoy a better quality of life.

We in the Caribbean have been forerunners in the fight against NCDs but regrettably we have stumbled and we must rejuvenate that proactivity. In 2007 our Caribbean leaders, at a Heads of State Summit in Port of Spain engaged in a phenomenal act of regional mobilization to fight NCDs globally. Emanating from that historic meeting was the Port of Spain Declaration to stop the epidemic of NCDs, which to our credit in the Caribbean, preceded the resolution on NCDs passed by the U.N. General Assembly in 2011. Prime Minister Ralph Gonsalves of St. Vincent and the Grenadines stated proudly, ***“The actions called for by the General Assembly echo the approach endorsed by the Caribbean countries.”***

**The Port of Spain Declaration** celebrated its 10 year anniversary and in an attempt to give added credence to this ground-breaking Declaration, on the 26th October, 2017, the Office of the President of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, hosted a reception of stakeholders to reaffirm and buttress the pillars of this Declaration and to rejuvenate the movement towards those goals- because as we all have agreed, our Caribbean leaders dropped the ball on this fight in a way that may well have set back the gains. I was told, subject to correction, it was the only function of its kind in the Region.

**The Port of Spain Declaration** must be part of our daily lives and part of every student’s life in the region. We need to resuscitate the very spirit and tenets of the Port of Spain Declaration and that call to arms was made, to their credit, at the 38th Regular Meeting at the Conference of CARICOM Heads of Government, July 4-6, 2017, St. George’s, Grenada. It is my expectation and I am certain, the expectation of the HCC and everyone here, that that call to arms and

action will be demonstrated by the highest level of Caricom representation at the UNHLM on NCDs.

In combating NCDs, we need to consider not only preventative and primary care but also palliative care. Many are dying of NCDs in the hospitals and hospices of the Caribbean region. As the patron of Vitas House Hospice of Trinidad and Tobago under the astute guidance of Dr Jacqueline Sabga, I fully appreciate the need for palliative care and necessary drugs for dying cancer patients. Drugs are sometimes unavailable because the whole process of drug approvals in the Caribbean is unwieldy, bureaucratic and not being addressed with the required speed and institutional urgency. Why must a country in the Caribbean go through the tedious and expensive process of a drug approval regime after approval of that same drug by, for example, the United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA)? The FDA approval, represents, I would hope, international benchmark standards for the operationalization and use of new drugs. They have the resources, infrastructure and finance beyond the capacity of many Caribbean countries. It begs the question, “Why then, are US FDA- approved drugs for the terminally ill and other patients years away from being approved locally and regionally?” This inability to provide the appropriate pain relief and other medications in the required dosage may well constitute an infringement of a person’s basic human rights.

I have made the practical suggestion and will continue to do so, that the Bahamian Pharmacy Act No. 8 of 2009 supported by the Pharmacy (Import and Export) Regulations, 2010 may be a legislative template for the proposed harmonised registration of drugs throughout the Caribbean. This law provides for the acceptance of foreign drugs locally that have been approved by The British Pharmacopeia; The United States Pharmacopeia; and The European Pharmacopeia.

This not only saves time, but also money, as the Authorities may well be saved the expense of paying experts to approve the many dossiers submitted to them. The availability of such drugs would decrease patient morbidity and mortality, easing the suffering of our loved ones. Coincidentally, only yesterday in the Trinidad and Tobago Guardian Newspaper, President of the Pharmacy Board, Andrew Rahaman, lamented that the issue in Trinidad and Tobago is not

counterfeit medication but rather the slow pace of registering medication being brought into the country. By allowing US FDA approved experimental drugs, we can also begin supervised clinical trials in collaboration with the various foreign entities and university hospitals- possibly resulting in a decrease in our medical brain drain and patients leaving the country to access US FDA approved drugs and experimental drugs.

I wish to emphasise that at all times and to the best of my ability, I utilised my Office to demonstrate that good and practical solutions can come from high office. I would like to take this opportunity to publicly congratulate **First Lady Sandra Granger of Guyana** who, with me, received the prestigious Global Female Impact Leadership Award for our individual efforts to end preventable deaths and improve the health and well-being of women, children and adolescents. Two of the 5 First Ladies to receive this award came from the Caribbean. **This speaks to the ability and capacity of the Caribbean Region to think big, act large and make a difference.** A healthier and happier Caribbean can only be achieved if all hands are on deck in the region.

Justice Carmona and I will continue to advocate the importance of the youth voice and involvement in Conferences like these. In 2014, at a Healthy Caribbean Coalition (HCC) NCD Conference at the Hyatt Regency, Port of Spain at behest of the Office of the President- after meeting with the esteemed Sir Trevor Hassel- 6<sup>th</sup> form “student ambassadors” from secondary schools were recruited and allowed to make contributions at the Conference.

NCD prevention is an investment in people because a Nation’s human resource is its most important asset and while there will always be competing priorities, NCDs must remain in the forefront. If something is responsible for some 80% of deaths in the Caribbean, it demands urgent and immediate attention, action and investment. When you are in State offices or in a position of status or authority, you can profile and highlight worthy agendas in a way to get the necessary traction to effect transformational change individually, collectively or institutionally- “CHAMPIONS” as pointed out by **Ms. Katie Dain of the NCD Alliance** and others, throughout this Forum.

Indeed, I second the advice of **His Excellency Courtenay Rattray- Permanent Mission of Jamaica to the United Nations**, that “*we must get all our ducks in a row for the UNHLM on NCDs.*” Indeed, the ducks must continue to walk in a row, with a united mission to fight this scourge of NCDs post UNHLM, until the Caribbean can boast that the RIGHT to freedom of choice means also the RIGHT and ENJOYMENT of healthy lifestyle choices.

In closing, might I emphasise that advocacy must have an indelible sense of real presence, not mere patronage from an ‘occasion’ person. Let me state the painfully obvious. Advocacy has its challenges and very few appreciate or are interested in the road to progress or success. **Many love the end game and I state this because you must never grow weary in your endeavour to build a Caribbean society where quality of life walks hand in hand with quality of health care.** I will continue to ventilate and disseminate this message of health empowerment for all. NCDs are wrecking lives and families and we all have a vested interest in getting it right through individual and collective empowerment in our communities, countries, region and the world.

On the guidance, wisdom, passion and expertise of Sir Trevor Hassel, Maisha, the inspirational Sir George Alleyne, the HCC team, and ALL of its valued stakeholders, I have a good feeling that the Caribbean NCD response will be making great strides progressing from this very productive, energising and stimulating 3-day Forum.

*I thank you.*