

“Constructing Supportive Health Environments Towards A Stronger Defense”

ACCELERATING NUTRITION POLICIES IN THE CARIBBEAN: Creating Supportive Environments for Healthy Children

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September 17-18, 2019, Accra Beach Hotel & Spa, Barbados

Official Opening Welcome

Honourable Lieutenant Colonel Jeffrey Bostic, Minister of Health and Wellness, Barbados

(Protocol to be read).

It is a special privilege for me to welcome you to this very important HCC meeting on *Accelerating Nutritional Policies in the Caribbean: Creating Supportive Environments for Healthy Children*, as the Minister of Health and Wellness. I also extend a special welcome to other members of our “one caribbean health environment”, especially my comrades in the various Ministries of Health. I recognize that some of you may have experienced challenges, whether regional air-travel or natural disaster related, and I congratulate on your persistence on being here to add your voice to this conversation.

Let me start by declaring that, although I am welcoming you in my official capacity as Minister of Health & Wellness, this meeting is of personal significance to me, because, as a citizen of this island, and a son of this vulnerable region, I have much more than a professional interest in the discussions you will have over the next two days. Indeed, I have a vested interest in the policies that you construct, and the plans that you propose to implement them. I have an interest in intimately knowing the details of how you set out timelines, and various performance metrics, and also, what efforts you have taken to ensure stakeholder buy-in and involvement. I am very interested to know these specific outcomes, not only as leader of the ministerial portfolio of Health & Wellness, but as a father, grandfather, and God father; simply put, this information is important to me as a citizen of this caribbean space.

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My professional life has been enhanced through the service of my country in the Barbados Defence Force. And although I am aware that many of you are of the health care landscape, I will share with you what I see as our challenges, through this lens, of an ever present enemy to this region.

I propose to execute my advice, with some military precision, under the following FOUR questions:

1. *How do we define the enemy and what are the possible security breaches in our environment?*
2. *What strategies need to be in place to attack?*
3. *When to attack?*
4. *When to reanalyze & re-strategize the attack?*

1. How do we define the enemy?

The non-communicable diseases (NCDs) are ravaging the islands of this region. They do so, not as threatening as this most recent enemy, Hurricane Dorian, but claim much devastation disguised in our territories as a friend, not foe. Although traditional health metrics describe diseases like high blood pressure, diabetes and obesity, these are driven by an enemy camouflaged in our environment in the social determinants of health. It has penetrated and corrupted our health environments, in a most cunning and slow-moving way, and now ravages the most vulnerable amongst us, our children. I can not easily digest the statistic that 1 in 3 children in this country is obese or overweight. It shocks me, as a grandfather, that the Barbados I leave behind may be less healthy than the one I inherited. This does not sit well with me, and it shouldn't.

When I growing up, there was no WiFi, Wii (*pronounced “we”*) or Wikipedia, and the sweat of my brow, bore real meaning to me as a young man. And I was not at all afraid of being persuaded to eat fast food; all food

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was slow - slowly grown, skillfully prepared, and with local fruits and vegetables, from a tree and not a can!

This was my environment. It wasn't just a healthy lifestyle, it was the only lifestyle!

This has changed slowly, over decades. The enemy has undergone a metamorphosis into more sophisticated forms, like transport systems and technologies that make it easier to be sedentary, whilst taking out gym memberships - exercise on demand! And its tentacles beacons our most vulnerable citizens, in our schools, where they now spend time and work, but possibly with little play. Where water is not attractive, or even available, as it's more attractive competitors. And where lunch time is now spent engaged with “smart” technology, rather than in physical activity. And so we must ask ourselves, have we carefully identified the enemy, in all of its many guises?

2. What strategies need to be in place to attack?

Based on my brief description about what I see as the enemy we face, it logically follows that our strategies for attack must be equally cunning and sophisticated. They should not be random or chaotic, but has to be a coordinated, well rehearsed exercised, executed targeted precision. As an urgency, we need to develop strategies that protect our children. Meetings such as this one, titled “**ACCELERATING NUTRITION POLICIES IN THE CARIBBEAN: Creating Supportive Environments for Healthy Children**”, serve as opportunities to develop, discuss, and dedicate efforts for policies to address urgent environmental changes:

- **Increase physical activity in schools** - to allow our children to play and compete. This needs to be both part of the formal and hidden curriculums, and has to extend beyond the school day into our villages, parishes, and national communities. Whether it takes the use of sports behavioral psychologists, or national tasks forces on physical activity, our children deserve the opportunity develop mentally, with physical activity.

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● **Healthy foods & access to water:** This audience knows very well the impact nutrition alone has on the health of our children. Unhealthy snacks, diets high in processed foods and low in vegetables and fruits, are recipes for a weaker future, and early death from obesity related heart attacks and stroke. Front of package label is a potential intervention, married with public education of food composition, to create more aware and informed consumer. Free access to water, and easy access to seasonal fruits and vegetables, must become the norm, so that the palate of our future leaders is changed. The “culture” must be transformed so that it becomes unnatural to eat unhealthily in such a healthy school environment.

3. When to attack?

This is by far your most critical challenge. Because even with the most wholistic identification of the enemy and breaches in one’s environment, and with the best constructed strategy of attack, timing is everything! You must determine, how will the policies which you discuss over the next two days, be implemented in a sequential manner, engaging your health stakeholders, and the people you represent, to best achieve your objectives. There must be a very delicate balance of research and surveillance, matched with decisive action. You do not have a decade to defeat the enemy. You must continue to partner with your governments, lobbying for policy and action, to repair and safeguard our landscape.

4. When to reanalyze & re-strategize the attack?

You would have noted in my earliest words to you this morning, I suggested that our enemy is very cunning and clever. The strategies and policies you must employ in 2019, may not be the most effective in 2030, or even 2025! You should guard against the comfort and arrogance of thinking that the policies you discuss

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today are infinitely valid. They are not. You will need to return to base, on many occasions, to assess the impact of your interventions, and to identify potential weaknesses in your strategy.

5. In closing:

I want to close by congratulating the Healthy Caribbean Coalition, on calling you to today’s table, to discuss **“ACCELERATING NUTRITION POLICIES IN THE CARIBBEAN: Creating Supportive Environments for Healthy Children”**. I am confident that this will not only be a meeting of the most valuable minds the health communities of this region have produced, but I sincerely hope that your focus remains the future minds you are safeguarding. The regional governments are depending on you to assist us in drafting our own policies and innovations.

I welcome you, on behalf of the government and people of Barbados, as Minister of Health and Wellness, to this meeting on the south coast of Barbados. I am, however, eagerly listening for your solutions, not only in this capacity, but also as a citizen of the region, and a cohabitant of our health environment.