



## HCC OPEN LETTER

# TO CARICOM HEADS OF STATE AND GOVERNMENT

February 28, 2019

Dear Honourable CARICOM Heads of State and Government,

The Healthy Caribbean Coalition noted with great interest recent comments in a press briefing following the 31<sup>st</sup> CARICOM Inter-Sessional Meeting of Heads of State and Government (HOSG) held in Barbados from February 18-19, 2020. The Honourable Mia Amor Mottley, CARICOM Chairman and Prime Minister of Barbados announced the **implementation of a comprehensive plan to reduce the regional food import bill by 25% over the next five years**<sup>1</sup>. The plan, developed by the newly formed Regional Private Sector Organization, reflects the ever-increasing concern of CARICOM Heads about the region's high food import bill which currently stands at around US 5 billion dollars, a 25% increase from the estimated figure in 2015 of 4 billion dollars<sup>2</sup>. A 2015 report by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) revealed that all but 3 CARICOM territories (Belize, Haiti and Guyana) imported more food than they produced, with half of CARICOM member states importing more than 80% of what they consume<sup>2</sup>.

One of the most common categories of food imported into the region, contributing significantly to the high import bill, is processed foods, which lead to excessive calorie intake and an increase in overweight and obesity, in turn leading to non-communicable diseases (NCDs)<sup>2,3</sup>. Processed food refers to foods made by the addition of sugar, salt, oil and other substances to natural foods. Ultra-processed food is further processed to contain additives not typically found in the kitchen such as artificial flavours, sweeteners, thickeners among other things. This includes foods such as packaged snacks, energy drinks and sweetened beverages and pre-prepared meals<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Mounsey, C. Comprehensive initiative to slash food import bill. Barbados Today. 2020 Feb 20. Available at: <https://barbadostoday.bb/2020/02/20/comprehensive-initiative-to-slash-food-import-bill/>

<sup>2</sup> FAO. State of Food Insecurity in the CARICOM Caribbean. FAO: Barbados; 2015. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/u91l8ky>

<sup>3</sup> CARICOM. Regional Food and Nutrition Security Action Plan 2012-2026. 2011. Available at: <http://www.fao.org/3/a-bs907e.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Monteiro CA, Cannon G, Lawrence M, da Costa Louzada ML, Machado, PP. *Ultra-processed foods, diet quality and health using the NOVA classification system*. Rome, FAO; 2019. Available at: <http://www.fao.org/3/ca5644en/ca5644en.pdf>

According to the FAO, food items high in calories, sugar and sodium accounted for about US 756 million dollars in imports (18% of import bill) while foods high in fats and oils accounted for US 516 million dollars (12% of import bill). **Taken together, almost one-third of food imported into the region is energy dense and high in fat, sugar and sodium (HFSS)**<sup>2</sup>. Diets consisting largely of processed and ultra-processed foods have been shown to dramatically increase overweight and obesity. **Unhealthy diet is in fact one of the major risk factors for NCDs** – a category of diseases which is responsible for 8 out of every 10 deaths in the Caribbean and approximately 40% of premature deaths. In this region, NCDs consume 60% of health budgets placing tremendous strain on under resourced health systems. In 2019 over US 65 million dollars was estimated to have been spent on conditions related to overweight and obesity<sup>5,6</sup>. **The region's high food import bill and its high cost of prevention and treatment of NCDs are inextricably linked**<sup>7</sup>.

As the only regional alliance of civil society organisations working to reduce the death and disability associated with non-communicable diseases (NCDs) we are deeply concerned about the dietary patterns of Caribbean people and we are committed to playing a role in **building healthy and sustainable food systems** in the region as demonstrated in our recent [Civil Society Call to Urgent Action for the Caribbean Region to Accelerate Nutrition Policies for the Creation of Healthy Environments for Caribbean Children](#). The HCC fully supports PM Mottley's vision of "a Caribbean that is committed to feeding itself more than it has within recent years."<sup>8</sup> We applaud CARICOM's plan to reduce the food import bill by 25% through a strategy that embraces regional agriculture by replacing some imports with regionally produced livestock and crops. **We urge the leadership of CARICOM to approach this initiative as a triple duty action which can see co-benefits in health and in fact climate adaptation as well.** Our hope is that this innovative plan can provide an **entry point for a movement away from imported processed foods in favour of regionally produced healthy agricultural products**, ultimately contributing to a reduction in diet-related NCDs their corresponding health care costs. The HCC and our 100+ regional members, and our national, regional and global partners with broad expertise, stand ready to provide support and guidance if desired. The HCC looks forward to a healthier and more food secure Caribbean. **"Eat healthy. Eat Caribbean"** - Sir Trevor Hassell, 2018.

**- Signed by The Board of Directors of the Healthy Caribbean Coalition**

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<sup>5</sup> Hinkson, D. Agriculture to the rescue. Barbados Today. 2018 Oct 18. Available at: <https://barbadostoday.bb/2018/10/09/agriculture-to-the-rescue/>

<sup>6</sup> World Obesity Federation. Calculating the costs of the consequences of obesity. 2017. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/szquwtb>

<sup>7</sup> Declaration of Port-Of-Spain: Uniting to Stop the Epidemic Of Chronic NCDs. 2007. Available at: <https://www.healthycaribbean.org/declaration-of-port-of-spain/>

<sup>8</sup> Press Conference - 31st Inter-Sessional Meeting of the Conference of Heads of Government of the CC. 2020 Feb 19. Available at: <https://youtu.be/lvzQB9ZiCf4?t=584>