

Building an accountability framework for childhood obesity policies in the Caribbean



The Healthy Caribbean Coalition developed an accountability framework to track and promote progress on governments' commitments in tackling the region's childhood obesity. An online policy-tracking platform and scorecard, CSO training, public involvement in accountability initiatives, technical support for managing conflicts of interest, and high-level advocacy formed the hallmark of this initiative. It has resulted in a unique civil society accountability initiative used by decision makers to assess NCD and obesity policies in the Caribbean.

INITIATIVE

Civil Society Accountability Framework for Childhood Obesity Prevention Policies in the Caribbean

ALLIANCE

Healthy Caribbean Coalition (HCC), a regional coalition of over 100 organisations from the Caribbean region established in 2008

 healthycaribbean.org

COUNTRY

Caribbean Community (CARICOM)

DATE

October 2017 to 2021

ACTIVITY



Primary

Enhancing accountability through transformative and inclusive governance



Secondary

Building demand through transformative social movements and voices of change

CASE SUMMARY

In response to the rising prevalence of childhood obesity in the region, HCC's civil society action plan for 2017-2021 is based on several WHO NCDS best buys, and seeks taxes on sugar sweetened beverages (SSBs), bans on their sale and marketing in schools, and mandatory front-of-package food labelling. Politically, several heads of governments and ministers of health from the region have publicly acknowledged the crisis and pledged action.

Building on this political momentum and its strategic plan, the HCC developed an Accountability Framework for Childhood Obesity Prevention in the Caribbean consisting of five pillars¹⁹.

1. Mapping regional and national political commitments

An online database captures and tracks progress on nutrition-related commitments made by high-level policymakers every quarter. A Childhood Obesity Prevention Scorecard (COPS)²⁰, developed consultatively with HCC stakeholders, provides a monthly snapshot of emerging policies.

2. Capacity development of HCC member CSOs and youth

HCC core staff and experts conduct webinars and regional meetings to improve their policy awareness, advocacy skills and ability to engage with the COPS platform.

3. Engaging public in accountability initiatives

The "Too Much Junk" campaign,²¹ involving champions, social media and national CSOs, gathered public signatures from 24 CARICOM countries on an online call to action petition directed at heads of governments to enact effective nutrition policies that can reduce childhood obesity.

¹⁹ The Accountability Framework for Childhood Obesity Prevention in the Caribbean is available here: <https://www.healthycaribbean.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/HCC-CSO-Accountability-Framework-for-COP>.

²⁰ The 'Childhood Obesity Prevention Scorecard' is available here: <https://www.healthycaribbean.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/COPS-Grid-December-2019-WEB.pdf>

²¹ The 'Too Much Junk' campaign website can be accessed here: <https://www.toomuchjunk.org/>

CASE STUDIES

Enhancing accountability through transformative and inclusive governance

Similarly, My Healthy Caribbean Schools (MHCS) online platform²² enables the public track and reports the implementation of national or facility-based nutrition regulations in school settings, for follow-up by relevant ministries.

4. Guidance on conflict of interest (COI) and industry interference

Beginning with a mapping of the food and beverage industry, an industry monitor further identifies industry interference in public health policymaking, COI and marketing to children. These are countered through national level advocacy and social media, and will soon be disseminated through a newsletter.

5. High-level advocacy for policymaker accountability

In addition to direct letters to heads of government, HCC launched A Civil Society Call to Urgent Action to heads of governments in the Caribbean to accelerate nutrition policies creating healthy environments for Caribbean children.

The strategic plan for the next two years will update the accountability tools, train the public sector and CSOs on COI, and continue mapping and countering of industry interference.

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Through this initiative, the HCC has brought into sharp focus the need to hold regional governments accountable for the commitments they have made in tackling childhood obesity in the Caribbean and the need to recognise and manage conflict of interest in the multi-sectoral approach to addressing nutrition. The results to date have clearly demonstrated the powerful role of civil society in ensuring that policymakers are held to the highest standards of accountability in this regard.”

Sir Trevor Hassell,
President, Healthy Caribbean Coalition

ANALYSIS

POWER OF ALLIANCES

The accountability platforms engage HCC civil society members, technocrats and policy makers in countries to share local intelligence, verify information and initiate follow-up on nutrition policies. This has led to governments using the COPS platform to source regional and global examples of policies and takes cases of COI/interference from the HCC interference monitor to guide policy formulation. One Ministry of Health is even using the MHSC platform as a monitoring and evaluation tool in its work.

The accountability platforms have leveraged key NCD international collaborations: WHO-PAHO in the COI work and the development of the COPS and the MHCS online platform; and HCC benchmarking capacity development through collaboration with the NOURISHING database and CO-CREATE project of the World Cancer Research Fund International. The NCDA helped in developing the strategic plan and ongoing tracking via the COPS platform; and the Caribbean Development Bank in COPS capacity development of CSOs. The Caribbean Public Health Agency (CARPHA) and CARICOM Secretariat Health Desk, partners in the public sector including NCD focal points, are central to the success of this accountability initiative.

INNOVATION

This is a first of its kind civil society-led accountability initiative on NCDs and health in the Caribbean. Moreover, there has been no other exploration of COI within the context of NCD public policy making or mapping of industry actions in public health policy interference in the region.

The initiative has also been innovative in consulting diverse stakeholders in its design and implementation, inspiring a sense of ownership and buy-in to ultimately increase the utility of various platforms. HCC has strategically convened stakeholders with political connections and intelligence in its regional meetings. Building relationships with key political actors and gatekeepers, such as with CARICOM and national governments, and working with regional and global NCD specialists in the area of benchmarking for childhood obesity prevention and in the area of COI, have been the hallmarks of this initiative.

²² The 'My Healthy Caribbean Schools' online platform can be accessed here: <https://www.healthycaribbean.org/cop/rate-my-school.php>

RESULTS

- Expanded access to information on the COPS platform, with over 4200 views since its launch in June 2018.
- Increased engagement of CSOs in supporting social media campaigns, high-level policy maker advocacy, and use of the various tracking tools.
- Engagement of the general public in accountability initiatives, with 659 public ratings of schools on the MHCS platform.
- Increased capacity of the HCC to effectively hold governments and public institutions accountable for COP political commitments.
- Greater awareness among HCC target groups (CSOs, public sector, and private sector) of strategies to identify and manage COI in the Caribbean.
- In 2018, CARICOM Ministers of Health informally endorsed the COPS platform at the 71st World Health Assembly.

Major impacts of the initiative have been:

- Invitation to HCC to be an observer at CARICOM meetings (including Health Ministers).
- Regional COP policy wins arising in part out of NCD civil society advocacy for accountability including bans or restrictions on SSBs in schools, impending SSB taxes, and advancement of a potential regional standard on mandatory front-of-package nutrition warning labels.

The initiative will be assessed at the end of 2021 as part of the evaluation of the CSAP.

CHALLENGES, ENABLERS, AND LESSONS LEARNED

The initiative met with low CSO accountability capacity. Limited technical and financial accountability capacity among the NCD civil society in small island communities is compounded by fears of compromising personal and professional relationships with unforeseen social or economic consequences when holding governments accountable and tracking industry interference and COI. Targeted capacity development cultivated this skill among some organisations, but more national support to HCC's regional calls for accountability is desired.

There was also low public accountability practice. Getting the general community engaged in the MHCS platform has been challenging, perhaps due to cultural reasons and limited resources.

There have been some policy wins, but the accountability work to date has been innocuous and shaped by the local environment. In the absence of clear-cut algorithms for identifying and managing COI in the public sector, this may not resolve perceived or real conflicts.

BRIDGING THE GAP

The initiative supports national, regional and international NCD, obesity and nutrition related targets, and plans including the WHO NCD best buys and recommended interventions. At the national level, 4 out of 20 CARICOM countries have national obesity plans, with obesity and nutrition targets. This initiative has helped and encouraged national advocates to work towards country obesity prevention plans, and NCD plans where obesity plans do not exist, to ensure the messaging around accountability includes nationally relevant targets. At the regional level, the initiative aligned well with CARPHA Plan of Action for Promoting Healthy Weights in the Caribbean: Prevention and Control of Childhood Obesity 2014-2019, and the 2014 PAHO Plan of Action for the Prevention of Obesity in Children and Adolescents to address the issue in the region of the Americas. At the global level, the initiative helps advance the WHO Global Action Plan for the Prevention and Control of NCDs 2013-2020 and the NCD Global Monitoring Framework; recommendations included in the 2016 Report of the WHO Commission on Ending Childhood Obesity; WHO Global Nutrition Targets 2025 United Nations Decade of Action on Nutrition, 2016-2025; and the Sustainable Development Goal 3.4.

This NCD accountability initiative on childhood obesity holds transferable strategies, activities and lessons for holding governments to account on their commitments made on other risk factors, and NCDs more broadly.



Students rating their schools under the My Healthy Caribbean Schools initiative in Barbados.