



### Conversations with Healthy Caribbean Coalition Youth: International Youth Day

Today, August 12<sup>th</sup> marks International Youth Day (IYD), commemorating the publishing of the Lisbon Declaration on Youth Policies and Programmes in 1998. The theme for 2020 is “Youth Engagement for Global Action” aiming to celebrate the many ways that young people are engaged in formal institutions at the local, regional and global levels but also to highlight areas for improvement.

*The need to engage youth is critical now more than ever, as Caribbean leaders, in collaboration with key stakeholders across diverse sectors, including civil society, map out plans to effectively manage and rebuild from the COVID crisis. These initial conversations and the eventual “build back better” blueprints will determine the legacy that will be left to future generations, and a critical voice – the youth voice – our voice - should not be left out. After all, how can we build a future without the voice of the future?*

The small-island developing states of the Caribbean have been particularly vulnerable to the social and economic impacts of COVID-19 due to the presence of an aging population, a high prevalence of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and the considerable dependence on foreign imports and tourism to economies. As the region grapples with the pandemic and explores strategies to manage associated ramifications, it is imperative that we address these vulnerabilities. Once we are ready to effectively rebuild, there is a need to ensure that the legacy passed to current and future generations is a society that is stronger and more resilient than ever before, effectively not just building back, but building back better. In managing the pandemic now and making plans for such a society, it would be remiss of stakeholders to exclude our voices. After all, we will be carrying on the legacy of today’s leaders.

The engagement of young people as advocates in the COVID-19 response is an important part of the COVID-19 Advocacy and Communication Strategy of the **Healthy Caribbean Coalition (HCC)**. This has been reflected in HCC’s youth-focused webinar series, “The Future Talks”. The most recent webinar, **The Future Talks: COVID-19 and NCDs in the Caribbean - The Legacy**, saw young professionals from across the region share their experiences and perspectives on the COVID-19 response and how we as Caribbean people can “build back better”.

Ms. Tara Armour, a trainee clinical psychologist at the University of the West Indies (UWI), Mona Campus, highlighted the impact that COVID-19 has had on mental health in the region, particularly amongst youth. She stressed that youth mental health must be a priority in all health systems, with the youth being included in related discussions. Dr. Keddy Moise, a young Haitian physician working with FHADIMAC<sup>1</sup>, spoke about community-based strategies being deployed to help persons living with NCDs manage their conditions during the pandemic, some of which he spearheaded. Ms. Eden Augustus, a trained chef and PhD student at UWI, Cave Hill Campus, assisted in a study that examined the behaviour of the general public during the height of COVID-19. She spoke to the power of research and its importance in identifying and managing persons affected by COVID-19; and highlighted the need for multisectoral research collaboration across the region. Ms. Kimberley Benjamin, a final-year law student at the Hugh Wooding Law School stressed the importance of prioritising strong regulatory environments in order to accelerate the prevention and management of NCDs. The panellists, with their varied and rich experiences and expertise, have been actively involved in the COVID responses in their various spheres, demonstrating the value and power of youth as actors and advocates.

So, why should our voices be a part of creating the policies that will shape the communities and countries that we will inherit? Young people are critical stakeholders with valuable insights and unique needs which are important considerations when designing policies, especially those which impact them. A great way to get us interested and engaged, is to involve us from the get-go. Rather than simply creating a policy that tells us what to do, we should be instrumental in policy formation, execution and evaluation; this will not only foster a sense of ownership but

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<sup>1</sup> Foundation Haïtienne de Diabète et de Maladies Cardio-Vasculaires - Haitian Foundation for Diabetes and Cardiovascular Diseases

strengthen our trust in public institutions. Involving us as co-creators and expert resources sends a powerful message of trust, confidence and leads to programmes and policies which truly reflect our needs.

If our region's leaders are thinking strategically about "building back better", they should be visualising a sustainable society for generations to come – one which purposefully involves and engages key sub populations including young people.

Some regional civil society organisations have commendably demonstrated how this can be done by engaging youth in addressing critical issues like childhood obesity and the prevention and management of NCDs. For example, The Heart Foundation of Jamaica, through the Go Red for Women initiative shed light on heart disease among women when they collaborated with young physician and Miss Jamaica World 2015 Dr. Sanneta Myrie; their joint messaging amplified the need for preventative approaches to tackle NCDs. HFJ is also growing their youth influencer program and has done work with the National Secondary Schools Council. The Barbados Childhood Obesity Coalition's has a youth sub-committee that is actively involved in guiding the obesity prevention agenda. A youth sub-committee member was invited to contribute to the National School Nutrition Policy consultations hosted by the local Ministries of Health and Wellness and Education, Technological and Vocational Training. Today, the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Barbados will also be launching "Act Now! Protect our Children's Health" – a youth informed and executed Mass Media Campaign. Relatedly, the Antigua and Barbuda Diabetes Association dedicates part of their programming to children and young people living with NCDs essentially supporting youth and giving them tools to confidently advocate for themselves and other vulnerable persons.

There are numerous ways that young people can be meaningfully engaged and supported. Politically, there are avenues for youth to directly influence policy through youth parliaments, membership on National NCD Commissions, and seeking out roles as youth champions and ambassadors both nationally and regionally. Young people have a right to participate in the democratic process.

Youth allies can also support you by intentionally contributing to and funding local youth-focused organisations and initiatives, providing mentorship and creating spaces for inter-generational collaboration. Ultimately, the opportunities offered to youth should be multi-sectoral in nature and involve as many stakeholders as possible (see HCC "Opportunities for Engaging Youth" graphic for other suggestions).

The urgency to build back and engage youth now is intensified by the fast-approaching deadline for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which states that children and young adults are 'critical agents of change'; the active engagement of youth in fulfilling these goals is critical to achieving sustainable and inclusive societies. With these global deadlines looming, paired with our region's challenges such as COVID-19 and climate change, the need for innovative ideas, concerted multisectoral action and the meaningful engagement and participation of youth is critical for effective and sustainable change. Conversations about managing the realities of the pandemic today and rebuilding for the future, are conversations that affect young people of today; these young people – we – must be part of this dialogue.

*The HCC congratulates all of the regional youth and youth organisations on their contributions to their societies during this unprecedented time. We have observed your dedication, commitment, innovations and knowledge-sharing. We look forward to seeing invitations from policymakers to engage you as critical actors moving forward. Youth continue to shatter preconceived notions and work collaboratively in different spheres to truly shape this "build back better" blueprint. Remember, nothing can be done for you, without you.*

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