



Public health before industry profits – Consumers’ Right to Know What’s in Our Food

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Caribbean consumers have a right to know what is in their food. This right is magnified when considering the reality of diet-related illnesses in our Caribbean region where 1 in every 3 children is overweight or obese and 40% of premature adult deaths are due to non-communicable diseases (NCDs). The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the importance of maintaining a healthy and supportive food environment to prevent and manage these diseases.

Clear nutrition labels on the front of packaged foods and beverages give consumers instant and easily understood information on the nutritional content of a product. These labels empower consumers to correctly, quickly and easily make healthy choices as it relates to the critical nutrients of public health concern namely sugars, total fats, saturated fats, trans fats, and sodium – all of which are linked to NCDs when consumed in excess. The implementation of regulations, like front-of-package nutrition warning labels, is important in maintaining this supportive food environment, especially for the most vulnerable.

Last month, the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) released a publication supporting nutrition labeling to combat NCDs entitled [‘Front-of-Package Labeling as a Policy Tool for the Prevention of Noncommunicable Diseases in the Americas’](#). One of the key messages from the report was that front-of-package nutrition warning labels outperform all other front-of-package labeling systems in informing consumers about the excessive amounts of critical nutrients associated with the greatest burden of disease.

Front-of-package nutrition warning labelling is an enabling policy intervention which facilitates other policies such as restricting the sale and marketing of unhealthy foods in school environments and fiscal policies which make healthy foods more affordable. This combination of warning label regulations and other obesity prevention policies has resulted in favourable health outcomes. The success of front-of-package warning labels has been well-documented in countries where it has been implemented, such as [Chile](#), [Mexico](#), Uruguay (and most recently Brazil), who are also grappling with alarming rates of obesity and related NCDs.

Regional public health advocates are hoping that the Caribbean will be next. Key stakeholders across the region, led by the CARICOM Regional Organisation for Standards and Quality

(CROSQ) are currently holding consultations to arrive at a consensus on the introduction of front-of-package nutrition warning labels in the Caribbean as part of the **CARICOM REGIONAL STANDARD: Labelling of Foods – Pre-Packaged Foods – Specification CRS 5**. According to Deryck Omar, Chief Executive Officer of CROSQ, the end of October represents a major milestone in the regional consultative process, the outcome of which could bring the region closer to the introduction of the warning labels.

The process, initiated over two years ago, has been heavily influenced by the regional food and beverage industry, which like their global counterparts, has been vocal in their opposition to the introduction of the labels which will easily identify foods high in fats, sugars and salts. Dr. Carlene Radix, Head of Health at the OECS Commission, supports the introduction of nutrition warning labels, *“For years the [ultra-processed food and beverage] industry has been using front-of-package labelling to sell products – it is time to use front-of-package nutrition warning labels to empower consumers to make healthier choices.”*

The HCC has been deeply involved in the regional deliberations, advocating for the introduction of front-of-package nutrition warning labelling across CARICOM as part of the organisation’s broader work to prevent and control NCDs. Sir Trevor Hassell, HCC President, noted at a recent regional meeting that, *“Despite the tremendous opposition from the private business sector, the HCC recognising the need for public health to take precedence over narrow business interest, has continued to contribute to regional efforts to improve standards of labelling of packaged food and beverages.”*

To assist countries in combating obesity and diet-related NCDs, a Guidebook entitled [‘What’s in Our Food? A guide to introducing effective front-of-package nutrient labels’](#) was recently published by leading global public health organization, Vital Strategies in partnership with the Global Food Research Program at the University of North Carolina (UNC). The guidebook lays out step by step guidance for the introduction of warning labels and targets a variety of stakeholders including governments, researchers, civil society groups and other stakeholders engaged in the development of front-of-package nutrient labels. It also presents specific strategies to counter opposition from the ultra-processed food and beverage industry. Deborah Chen, Executive Director of the Heart Foundation of Jamaica, welcomed this guidebook, and encouraged the Jamaican government to *“consider adopting and enforcing an effective front-of-package labeling system that will enable Jamaicans to make healthier choices.”*

This need to protect public health policy was recently underscored by the former UN Special Rapporteur on the right to health, Dr. Dainius Pūras, who issued a [statement](#) in July 2020 emphasising that the *“States’ obligations include ensuring equal access for all to nutritiously safe food as an underlying determinant of health”*, identified *“front-of-package warning labelling [as] a key measure for States to tackle the burden of NCDs”*, and reinforced that *“States are required to adopt regulatory measures aimed at tackling NCDs, such as front-of-package warning labelling”*. The statement also addressed industry interference: *“States should decisively counter undue influence of corporations on government decision-making by strengthening legal frameworks and safeguard the policies that protect the right to health, such as the front-of-package warning labelling, from commercial and other vested interests of the food and beverage industry.”*

Against a backdrop of rising obesity and diet-related NCDs such as diabetes, heart disease and cancer, the HCC is committed to promoting policies such as mandatory front-of-package nutrition warning labels as a part of wider package of food policies, which make it easier for Caribbean people to consume healthy foods.

In 2018 CARICOM Heads of government and state endorsed front-of-package labelling. They now have an opportunity to deliver on that promise and demonstrate a clear commitment to the health of its citizens by saying no to private sector profit-driven interests and yes to public health. The HCC and our members encourage governments to adopt and enforce region-wide mandatory front-of-package nutrition warning labels. Consumers have the right to know what is in their food.

Author:

Maisha Hutton, Executive Director, Healthy Caribbean Coalition (HCC).

Maisha Hutton is the Executive Director of the HCC, a regional alliance of over 100 NCD focussed civil society organisations. Mrs Hutton leads on the HCC's food policy work which includes advocacy for the introduction of nutrition policies such as front of package nutrition warning labels. She works closely with regional and international partners seeking to reshape food systems through strong evidence-based healthy food policy.

Email: Maisha.hutton@healthycaribbean.org