



MEDIA RELEASE

A call to Caribbean leaders for introduction of octagonal front-of-package warning labelling to tackle obesity

Bridgetown, Barbados, 14 April 2021 (PAHO/WHO) - As voting across CARICOM Member States to adopt the final draft of a CARICOM Regional Standard for labelling of pre-packaged foods – which incorporates octagonal front-of-package warning labelling – runs until 31 May 2021, the urgency of introducing octagonal front-of-package warning labelling was also highlighted by the Healthy Caribbean Coalition (HCC), the Pan American Health Organisation (PAHO), the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) Commission, The United Nations Children’s Educational Fund (UNICEF) and the Caribbean Public Health Agency (CARPHA) in a webinar held on April 7th, 2021.

Leaders must move quickly to approve and implement effective front-of-package warning labels to help Caribbean people make healthier dietary choices the easier choice, said a high-level panel during a virtual event which drew almost 400 participants.

A dialogue with the public under the auspices of the multi-partner campaign *Now More Than Ever: Better Labels, Better Choices, Better Health*, brought together experts from regional public health institutions, civil society, inter-governmental organizations, academia and United Nations agencies to discuss front-of-package warning labels (FOPWL) as a key tool of a comprehensive strategy to address the epidemics of childhood obesity and non-communicable diseases (NCDs) ravaging the Caribbean. These FOPWL are used to indicate ultra-processed and processed packaged products high in sugars, fats and/or salts which are drivers of these silent epidemics.

According to Dr Aloys Kamuragiye, UNICEF Representative for the Eastern Caribbean Area, “*We have a health crisis on our hands. One in three children in the region is overweight or obese. But we are not powerless. There is much we can do to vigorously challenge a food environment which damages our children and blights their future.*”

During the webinar, presenters highlighted that there is incontrovertible scientific evidence, including a randomized controlled trial conducted in Jamaica, showing that octagonal warning labels are the best performing system to allow consumers to correctly, quickly and easily identify products with an excessive amount of the critical nutrients implicated in the development of NCDs.

Dr Anselm Hennis, Director of PAHO’s Department of NCDs and Mental Health, said that we must make nutrition information more available and accessible to consumers who have the ‘right to know’, through effective front-of-package warning labelling. “*Shoppers spend only a few seconds selecting an item, too little time to find out whether the product is good for their health or contributes to high blood pressure, high blood sugar, overweight and obesity; three conditions responsible for almost half of all deaths in the Caribbean,*” he contended.

The need to put more power in the hands of the shopper was emphasized by Dr Didacus Jules, Director General of the OECS, who called for mandatory octagonal warning labels and reminded the audience that “*our health is our greatest wealth*”. He added, “*We have a right to know what the food we consume contains in order to exercise informed and healthy choices.*” Dr Jules also encouraged the support of the regional food and beverage sector urging ‘*Caribbean manufacturers to see the huge opportunity for them to adopt these standards and position themselves with products that are reflective of healthy eating.*’

The wide-ranging discussion also touched on COVID-19, which exacerbates the vulnerability of those living with NCDs. Dr Joy St. John, Executive Director of the CARPHA observed that “*If the Caribbean could get together, and as one, fight COVID-19, I think that we can work together – government, private sector and consumers – so that front of package labelling gives everybody the best chance*”. Sir Trevor Hassell, President of the HCC, emphasized that the pandemic laid bare structural inequities in health and in the NCD response. “*This is particularly evident in the area of food consumption where the overconsumption of widely accessible, cheap, heavily marketed, poorly labelled, processed and ultra-processed packaged foods, high in sugars, salts and fat contributes to unhealthy diets.*”



In his closing remarks Sir Trevor reinforced that “*The HCC in pursuit of its mandate to use the power of civil society, to prevent and manage NCDs among Caribbean people, will continue to advocate for the adoption of the octagonal ‘High In’ model and the PAHO Nutrient Profile model as being in the best public health interest of the region.*”

The Final Draft CARICOM Regional Standard (FDCRS) for front of package labeling based on the octagonal front-of-package warning labeling, is based on rigorous scientific evidence, and is supported by a number of regional institutions/organizations including: PAHO, CARPHA, OECS, UNICEF, the Caribbean Association of Nutritionists and Dieticians (CANDi) and the HCC.

To the editor:

The “Now More Than Ever: Better Labels, Better Choices, Better Health” campaign was launched on March 12 by HCC, in partnership with the PAHO, the OECS Commission and UNICEF. Running until 17 April 2021, it is being rolled out across social media, digital media, and radio platforms in CARICOM Member States.

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For more information visit our Partner webpages:

Healthy Caribbean Coalition: <https://www.healthycaribbean.org/now-more-than-ever-regional-campaign-promoting-front-of-package-warning-labelling/>

Pan American Health Organisation: <https://www.paho.org/en/front-package-warning-labeling-fopwl-caribbean>

OECS Commission: <https://www.oecs.org/en/>

UNICEF: <https://www.unicef.org>

The Partners:

Healthy Caribbean Coalition is the only regional NCD alliance of health and non-health civil society organizations. HCC, with over 100 members, works closely with regional and international leaders in NCD prevention and control to leverage the power of civil society by strengthening and supporting its membership in the implementation of programmes aimed at reducing the morbidity and mortality associated with NCDs. [Twitter](#) [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#)

The Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) is an International Inter-governmental Organisation dedicated to regional integration in the Eastern Caribbean and works across its programmatic areas and in all Member States to consolidate the single economic space for enhanced economic growth, social inclusion and environmental protection.

The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) works with the countries of the Americas to improve the health and quality of life of the population. Founded in 1902, it is the world's oldest international public health agency. It serves as the Regional Office for the Americas of WHO and is the specialised health agency of the Inter-American system.

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