



Our Food, Our Health, Our People
***Accelerating Healthy Food Policies to tackle NCDs Health Caribbean Coalition: A
Transformative New NCD Agenda***
Virtual Conference - July 1, 2021.

Opening Remarks

Mr. Dean Chambliss, Subregional Program Director, PAHO

Good morning. It is my pleasure to bring greetings on behalf of PAHO at to this exciting and motivating Virtual Regional Conference “*Our Food, Our Health, Our People*”, aimed at building regional momentum for the implementation of healthy food policies. I am pleased to join the Healthy Caribbean Coalition and many of our long-standing partners for what needs to be an urgent conversation about NCDs, overweight and obesity, grounded in the principles of human rights and equity. It is only through a health in all policies, whole-of-society, and whole-of-government approach that we’ll be able to make significant headway in these issues, and PAHO is proud of its partnership and collaboration with the HCC through the years, recognizing the unique role that civil society has to play.

As you know, NCDs remain leading causes of mortality, diseases, and disability in the Caribbean, representing almost 8 out of every 10 deaths in the region. High blood pressure, high fasting blood sugar levels and overweight and obesity, are the main drivers of this burden, causing 47% of all deaths and the loss of 4.6 million years of healthy life in 2019 alone. And these are years of life that were lost not only because people died prematurely but also because they lived without being able to complete routine activities such as going to school, working, playing, or enjoying their lives to their full potential.

In the Caribbean, high blood pressure, high fasting blood sugar levels and overweight and obesity are closely linked to unhealthy diets, and an excessive intake of sugars, total fats, saturated fats, trans fats and sodium. In turn, the excessive intake of these “critical nutrients” of public health concern, is largely driven by the widespread availability, affordability, and promotion of processed and ultra-processed food products with unhealthy profiles.

This silent crisis of NCDs and unhealthy diets has far reaching consequences for the human and socioeconomic development of our region. The Caribbean now has the highest rates of childhood overweight and obesity in the Americas, which not only undermines the physical, social, and psychological well-being of our children, but also represents a known risk factor for adult obesity and NCDs, causing premature deaths throughout the life course.

Furthermore, persons living with NCDs face a greater risk of becoming severely ill or dying from COVID-19; and it is estimated that at least 1/3 of the Caribbean population is at such higher risk based on the presence of at least one underlying condition. In addition, the public health measures put in place to curve the spread of the virus, including lockdowns and school

closures; the disruption of food chains; and the pandemic-related economic fallout, continue to have a negative impact on diet and physical activity.

Against this dire background, the purpose of today's Conference is to focus on the solutions. The pandemic provides an opportunity for action and change, as HCC is calling for through its "*Transformative New NCD Agenda*"; and CARICOM Heads of State and Government have already prioritized the development of a *Regional Agenda on Food and Nutrition Security* to tackle CARICOM's significant import bill, which has been noted as an opportunity to address NCDs.

Another essential part of the solution is the use of laws and regulations to reduce the demand for and offer of processed and ultra-processed products that contain excessive amounts of sugar, fats and sodium. Part of our discussion today will be focused on policy measures we can take as part of a comprehensive strategy to create healthier food environments.

And there are also important opportunities to catalyze progress on this front. Just yesterday, the Caribbean Court of Justice Academy for Law in collaboration with PAHO launched the "*Caribbean Public Health Law Forum*" which brings together CARICOM Institutions, governments, civil society, and academia to facilitate communication, collaboration and engagement between Health and Legal Affairs to address NCDs.

Another crucial opportunity is the ongoing process led since 2018 by CROSQ, the CARICOM Regional Organization of Standards and Quality, to revise the current standard for prepackaged foods to incorporate FOPWL specifications. This has been done through an extensive, consultative process involving all relevant stakeholders.

The resulting Final Draft CARICOM Regional Standard is based on the most rigorous scientific evidence, including octagonal warning labels to indicate if a product is "HIGH IN" sugars, total fats, saturated fats, trans fats and/or sodium, and the PAHO nutrient profile model (PAHO NPM), which has established the thresholds that define when these "critical nutrients" of public health concern are in excess.

There are hundreds of different FOPL systems applied to products worldwide, with different purposes. However, there is now incontrovertible scientific evidence free from conflict of interest, including a randomized controlled trial conducted in Jamaica, showing that octagonal front-of-package warning labels are the best performing system for the intended regulatory objective of allowing consumers to correctly, quickly and easily identify products that contain excessive amounts of critical nutrients.

FOPWL is supported by strong regional mandates, including the Port of Spain Declaration, the communiqués of the 37th and 39th Conference of Heads of State and Government, and CARPHA's 6-point policy package to address overweight and obesity. Moreover, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Health has recognized octagonal FOPWL as an effective tool to protect the rights to health and to adequate food; noting that it balances the starting point for all consumers by providing equality in access to information relevant to health.

FOPWL can also serve as an enabler of other key policies such as the restriction of marketing to children, taxation, or school-based interventions.

We are therefore at a turning point, in which real change is possible, and we must approach this opportunity with a sense of urgency: without clear efforts to promote action on the prevention of unhealthy diets, the rise of NCDs will remain unstoppable, with irreparable consequences on health and development. No more than ever, the health and well-being of our people, our children, needs to be prioritized, as an essential driver of economic recovery and resilience.

I wish to thank you for your participation today and look forward to a rich and fruitful discussion.