



HCC OPEN LETTER

March 20, 2023

THE HONOURABLE KAY MCCONNEY

MINISTER OF EDUCATION, TECHNOLOGICAL AND VOCATIONAL TRAINING,
BARBADOS

And

SENATOR DR. THE MOST HONOURABLE JEROME WALCOTT

MINISTER OF HEALTH AND WELLNESS BARBADOS

And

DR. THE HONOURABLE SONIA BROWNE

MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF HEALTH AND WELLNESS
BARBADOS

**CONGRATULATIONS ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF
BARBADOS NATIONAL SCHOOL NUTRITION POLICY**

Dear The Honourable Kay McConney, Senator Dr. The Most Honourable Jerome Walcott, and Dr. The Honourable Sonia Browne,

The Healthy Caribbean Coalition (HCC) extends congratulations to the Government of Barbados and the Ministries of Health and Education on the successful launch of the [Barbados National School Nutrition Policy](#) in February 2023 and the banning of the sale of beverages containing added sugars, artificial sweeteners or additives in schools beginning in the third term in April 2023. This significant policy action taken by the Government of Barbados delivers on national and regional commitments to tackle childhood overweight and obesity through a package of evidence-based policy measures including banning the sale and marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages in and around school settings. The Barbados National School Nutrition Policy, originally approved by Cabinet in May 2022, realises a commitment made by Honourable Prime Minister Mia Amor Mottley, at the 39th Summit of CARICOM Heads of Government and State in 2018 when Heads endorsed a number of priorities for the 3rd UN High Level Meeting on Noncommunicable Diseases (NCDs) including: *"implementing policies geared to preventing childhood obesity, including health-promoting school environments"*.

The HCC, both local and regional members, strongly support this policy measure which complements the recently increased sugar sweetened beverage (SSB) tax at 20% - as part of a wider strategy to combat the urgent health, economic and economic challenges posed by childhood and adult obesity and NCDs in Barbados.

As one of a growing number of countries regionally and globally prioritising NCD prevention through the implementation of regulations which meaningfully change food environments by reducing affordability and availability of ultra-processed foods high in sugars, salts and fats, Barbados is demonstrating tremendous leadership. The Caribbean has the highest NCD mortality rate in the Americas and 40% of these deaths occur prematurely before the age of 70 years affecting our most productive with dire socioeconomic consequences in a time when Caribbean populations are aging and placing significant strain on already vulnerable economies. Obesity is a major underlying factor which contributes to the development of NCDs, such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease. Two-thirds of Barbadians are either living with overweight or obesity and the corresponding figure for Barbadian children is one-third¹ placing these children on a trajectory for health complications in childhood and adolescence and increased risk of NCDs in adulthood.

¹ <https://data.worldobesity.org/country/barbados-17/report-card.pdf>

Unfortunately, these figures show no sign of decline. Per the 2023 edition of the World Obesity Atlas,² Barbados is expected to see a 2.6% annual increase in adult obesity and a 4.7% increase in childhood obesity over the period 2020-2035. Overweight and obesity have a profound economic impact through loss of productivity, premature death and health care expenditure. By 2035, this is expected to cost Barbados US \$305 million. It is imperative that bold policy action is taken immediately to reverse these alarming trends.

The 20% tax on SSBs and the National School Nutrition Policy are a step in the right direction. At least 73.3% of students aged 13-15 consume at least one carbonated soft drink per day, while 70.9% are not achieving WHO recommended levels of physical activity³. As unhealthy diet and physical activity are major contributors to overweight and obesity, and related NCDs, we commend the National School Nutrition Policy for addressing both of these risk factors. Barbadians – adults and children - have a right to live, grow, work and thrive in environments which support healthy behaviours rather than encouraging unhealthy habits. Since 2016, Barbados has supported three key policy actions recommended by the Caribbean Public Health Agency (CARPHA), The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO)/WHO and the HCC – 1. Taxation of unhealthy foods while subsidising healthy options; 2. Improving the food (regulating the sale and marketing of ultra-processed foods) and physical activity environments in schools to specifically tackle childhood obesity; and 3. Maintaining support for a regional standard for the labelling of prepackaged foods which includes front of package ‘high-in’ warning labels to empower consumers to identify unhealthy foods and purchase healthier unprocessed or minimally processed foods. Such policy measures, when implemented effectively, create strong regulatory environments which support positive dietary behaviours, help drive product reformulation, and encourage manufacturers and retailers to increase the availability of affordable, healthier food and beverage options. Additionally, Barbados is a signatory to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), thereby underscoring the important role of government to ensure that those most vulnerable in the population - our children - are protected from continuous exposure to harmful environments that promote consumption of ultra-processed foods.

Finally, HCC commends Barbados' continued commitment to a whole-of-government and whole-of-society NCD response. The National School Nutrition Policy is a product of the partnership between two Ministries with acknowledged ongoing strong support from civil society

² https://www.worldobesityday.org/assets/downloads/World_Obesity_Atlas_2023_Report.pdf

³ https://cdn.who.int/media/docs/default-source/ncds/ncd-surveillance/data-reporting/barbados/gshs/2011_barbados_gshs_fs.pdf?sfvrsn=652e38c1_5&download=true

through the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Barbados and the Barbados Childhood Obesity Prevention Coalition.

We applaud the bold and visionary leadership of the Office of the Prime Minister, the Ministries of Health, Education and local civil society organisations and we pledge our continued support as Barbados implements its National School Nutrition Policy and related policies over the coming months and years.

- The Board of Directors, staff and volunteers of the HCC, Technical Advisors and HCC regional CSO membership