

Healthy Caribbean Coalition and Healthy Caribbean Youth Launch New Regional Guidance to Strengthen Meaningful Youth Engagement in Health Decision-Making

New resource aims to empower youth and young people living with noncommunicable diseases to shape healthier futures across the Caribbean

The Healthy Caribbean Coalition (HCC) and its youth arm, Healthy Caribbean Youth (HCY), with support from the Commonwealth Foundation, recently launched the **Guidance on Meaningful Engagement of Youth, Including Young People Living with Non-Communicable Diseases in NCD-Related Health Decision-Making Across CARICOM** on July 21st during a regional webinar held in collaboration with the CARICOM Secretariat Youth Desk. The Guidance Note is designed to help governments, health institutions, civil society organisations, and youth leaders strengthen inclusive and meaningful participation in health governance across the Caribbean.

The Guidance Note responds to a longstanding gap in the region. While young people and persons living with NCDs are disproportionately affected by the Caribbean's growing burden of noncommunicable diseases they have too often been excluded from the decisions that shape the policies and programmes affecting their lives.

"Young people are not simply beneficiaries of health policies—they are experts in their own lived experiences and essential partners in creating healthier Caribbean societies," said Maisha Hutton, Executive Director of the Healthy Caribbean Coalition. "The guidance represents an important milestone. It is the first regionally tailored framework to support the institutionalisation of meaningful youth engagement in NCD-related decision-making across CARICOM, translating global commitments on social participation into practical action for Caribbean Small Island Developing States.."

The launch comes at a pivotal time as countries across CARICOM continue efforts to strengthen health systems and implement people-centred approaches that align with global commitments, including the Agenda Item 11.1 at the World Health Assembly (WHA77) Agenda Item 11.1 on Social Participation.

Across the Caribbean, opportunities for youth participation in health governance remain limited. Many countries lack formal mechanisms for engaging youth and young people living with NCDs in health policy development. Even where opportunities exist, barriers such as stigma, limited access to information, and unfamiliarity with policymaking processes often prevent meaningful participation. Existing structures provide important opportunities for civic engagement but are not consistently integrated into health governance.

The Guidance Note addresses these challenges by documenting existing mechanisms for engagement, outlining principles for meaningful participation, and providing practical recommendations for governments, National NCD Commissions, civil society organisations, and youth advocates.

Importantly, the Guidance Note was developed through a collaborative and evidence-informed process. It draws on multiple regional youth consultations, in-depth interviews with youth leaders, people living with NCDs, representatives of National NCD Commissions, civil society organisations, and allies of youth engagement, together with a review of regional and global evidence and best practices. The lived experiences, recommendations, and priorities shared through these consultations directly informed the Guidance Note, ensuring that it reflects both international best practice and the realities of meaningful youth engagement within the CARICOM context.

The resource forms part of HCC's regional initiative, **Caribbean Youth Voices: Healthy Caribbean Futures**, implemented from September 2025 to September 2026 with support from the Commonwealth Foundation.

The Guidance Note also served as the foundation for the project's regional capacity-building programme. HCC partnered with the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Barbados and the St. Lucia Diabetes and Hypertension Association to deliver youth-focused in-person workshops in Barbados and Saint Lucia, followed by regional virtual training sessions that brought together youth advocates and young people living with NCDs from across CARICOM. Using the Guidance Note as a practical learning tool, participants strengthened their advocacy skills, and learned strategies for meaningful engagement.

Building on this work, HCC and Healthy Caribbean Youth have also developed a companion Youth Handbook on Meaningful Engagement. Designed specifically for young people, the handbook translates the Guidance Note into an accessible, action-oriented resource that supports youth advocates in understanding health decision-making processes and provides practical tips for navigating opportunities for engagement. The handbook is currently undergoing a pilot phase with youth participants and will be launched later this year.

Participant and Diana quote.

Looking ahead, the initiative will continue supporting youth-led advocacy in the lead-up to International Youth Day in August and Caribbean Wellness Day in September, both of which will spotlight youth leadership in health. Young advocates trained through the programme in Barbados and Saint Lucia are preparing to engage National NCD Commissions, Ministries of Health, and other key stakeholders to discuss national health priorities and explore sustainable mechanisms for youth engagement in health decision-making.

Jenée Farrell, consultant on the project and curator of the Guidance Note, noted, "The future of Caribbean health policy depends on ensuring that those most affected have the opportunity,

skills, and support to contribute meaningfully. This Guidance Note is more than a publication—it is a practical resource that we hope governments, institutions, and civil society organisations will use to institutionalise meaningful youth engagement and create lasting mechanisms for participation across the Caribbean."

The Healthy Caribbean Coalition encourages governments, regional organisations, health institutions, youth-serving organisations, civil society partners, and individual advocates to adopt and endorse the Guidance Note as they strengthen health governance and work toward more inclusive decision-making across the Caribbean. The Guidance Note, endorsement form, and additional project resources are available on the HCC website.