

## Control of NCD: A Caribbean Perspective

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Caribbean political leaders have, over the past four decades, shown significant leadership in responding to the health and development challenges posed by chronic diseases, also known as noncommunicable diseases or NCDs.

In 2007, Heads of Government of Caribbean countries (CARICOM) held a Summit on NCDs in Port of Spain, Trinidad, to discuss the impact of NCDs on the people of the region [1]. The meeting concluded with the issuance of a series of recommendations aimed at reducing the burden of NCDs through comprehensive and integrated preventive and control strategies and a multisectoral, collaborative approach. Caribbean leaders subsequently contributed to efforts which have led to the planned United Nations High Level Meeting (UNHLM) on noncommunicable diseases.

Health nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in many Caribbean countries have contributed to the NCD response for many years. The upcoming UNHLM catalyzed their efforts, and integrated and multi-sectoral approaches resulted in several countries. This paper describes three examples of such approaches; the Caribbean Tobacco Control Project (CTCP); formation of the Healthy Caribbean Coalition (HCC) and subsequent launch of a mobile text based advocacy and educational campaign; and the implementation of a population Salt Reduction Program. It concludes by highlighting desired outcomes from the UNHLM necessary to allow for these and other regional initiatives to be further developed.

### CARIBBEAN TOBACCO CONTROL PROJECT (CTCP)

The CTCP is led by the Jamaica Coalition for Tobacco Control and the Heart Foundation of

Jamaica in association with the InterAmerican Heart Foundation and the Framework Convention Alliance (FCA). It involves an NCD alliance of health NGOs that includes the Heart Foundation of Jamaica, Heart and Stroke Foundation of Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago Cancer Society and the Guyana Chest Society. The CTCP, funded by a grant from the Bloomberg Global Initiative (April, 2008), is the first public health project of its kind to be undertaken by a group of Caribbean health NGOs. The primary objective of the project was to advocate for and assist in the implementation of a strong CARICOM cigarette labeling standard, consisting of large rotating pictorial warning labels on tobacco products sold in the Caribbean. Significant progress has been made in reaching this primary objective, and the project has served as a catalyst for many positive developments around tobacco control in the region. All countries in the English speaking Caribbean have now ratified the FCTC, with St. Kitts and Nevis being the most recent to do so.

### HEALTHY CARIBBEAN COALITION (HCC)

The HCC is an NCD alliance of Health NGOs and civil society organizations established for the purpose of responding to NCDs through promotion of healthy lifestyle, better management of NCDs, building supportive environments, and empowering people. It was established to bring a regional dimension to the efforts of civil society in responding to NCDs by supporting the Port of Spain Declaration and following policies and principles as outlined in its Declaration and Action Plan. The HCC is presently conducting a mobile phone text based social and traditional media advocacy and educational campaign, branded as the Get the Message campaign, in

support of the UNHLM. Sir George Alleyne [2] at the recent United Nations interactive civil society meeting called on civil society to “agitate, educate, communicate, and integrate” to get the best possible outcomes leading up to and beyond the UNHLM. This charge reflects well the objectives of the campaign, and an interim analysis has shown a significant number of text responses in support of the UNHLM, tremendous following of its facebook page (12,000), and an appreciable increase of unique visits to the HCC website page (18,000 per month). Such outcomes are all indicators of a significantly heightened awareness of NCDs in the region.

#### **BARBADOS SALT REDUCTION PROGRAM**

The Heads of Government of the CARICOM Summit on NCDs mandated, among other things, the setting up of National Inter-sectoral NCD Commissions as instruments for enhancing the response to NCDs. National NCD commissions have been established in many Caribbean countries and have increased their activities as a result of the upcoming UNHLM. By way of example, the Barbados NCD Commission launched a National Nutrition Improvement and Population Salt Reduction Program which has endorsed a PAHO/WHO Policy Statement: “Preventing Cardiovascular Disease in the Americas by Reducing Dietary Salt Intake Population-wide”; produced a salt information booklet for opinion leaders and a nutrition booklet for school children; held workshops for food vendors and school canteen operators; placed public service messages on local television; held discussions with food and beverage manufacturers around product reformulation; and advocated for national fiscal policies to make healthy food more affordable. The program is supported by the HCC and has been shared with other Caribbean countries, and a similar program is being undertaken in Jamaica.

#### **CARIBBEAN PERSPECTIVE ON THE UNHLM**

Small Island Developing States (SIDS) are recognized by the United Nations as a distinct group of

countries facing specific social, economic and environmental vulnerabilities [3]. Constraints to sustainable development of these countries include a narrow resource base; small domestic markets; heavy dependency on a few external and remote markets; high costs for energy, infrastructure, transportation, communication and servicing; little resilience to natural disasters; high volatility of economic growth; and fragile natural environments [4]. Development of these countries is anticipated to be further threatened by NCDs to which they are significantly exposed. The Caribbean health NGO community is, therefore, hopeful that an outcome of the UNHLM will be significant consideration given to this group of countries in an effort to boost their capacity at all levels, including strengthening of regional health institutions; enhancing research and monitoring and evaluation capabilities; support for passage of healthy fair-trade policies and international best practice food labeling; and implementation of the FCTC.

The UNHLM presents a once in a lifetime opportunity to focus attention on NCDs, to enhance prevention, and to obtain better systems for the treatment of people suffering from NCDs. Caribbean health NGOs are fully supportive of, and embrace, the concept that a “whole of society and whole of government” approach is needed to effectively respond to NCDs. A pivotal and necessary outcome of the UNHLM must be the creation of conditions for Caribbean health NGOs to more effectively contribute to the whole of society’s response to NCDs. As a direct outcome of the UNHLM, Caribbean health NGOs need to achieve international agreements and mechanisms that: allow them to be more effective advocates; enhance their ability to engage in public education programs; make them more effective at holding policy makers and stakeholders more accountable (for example, in honoring their obligations under the FCTC); assist them in supporting NCD risk factor reduction and NCD initiatives, plans, and programs at country and organization level; and ensure the continued further development and capacity building of regional health NCD alliances.

## REFERENCES

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