



February 26, 2016

P r e s s R e l e a s e

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Uniting to Stop the Epidemic of NCDs – Time to Accelerate Action

Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, 26 February, 2016: The regional response to the grave threat posed by non-communicable diseases (NCDs) must be intensified immediately if the health, wellbeing and development gains of Caribbean people are to be protected. This was the key message emerging from a major regional workshop in Port of Spain held on 24-25 February.

The lively two-day event brought together Ministers, academics, experts and activists from some 14 Caribbean countries to review the results of an expert evaluation of the landmark 2007 CARICOM Port of Spain Declaration on NCDs. A new Plan for Action was also developed. NCDs, such as heart attack, stroke, diabetes and cancer, are taking a heavy toll on the population in the region and the risk factors that lead to these diseases are spiralling. The NCD burden in the Caribbean is the worst in the Americas. In some countries, 80% of adults are overweight or obese, more than half have high blood pressure and 25% are diabetic.

Addressing the gathering at the Hilton Hotel, the Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh, Trinidad and Tobago's Minister of Health, was very forthright and talked passionately about his own experience. "I am a 'poster boy' for diabetes," He said. "I belong to the Asian racial grouping and have a predisposition for diabetes. Genetics will tell me my parents were diabetics and suffered horrendous deaths due to complications of diabetes. I can't help that. But what I can change is what I eat, how I exercise and how I live my life."

According to Dr Alafia Samuels, Director of the Chronic Disease Research Centre and one of the leaders of the evaluation project, the Plan for Action emerging from the workshop will enable people to make these healthy choices and changes. "We need to set priorities together, we need to make recommendations and monitor what we are doing to see the impact of our programmes. Have we reduced high blood pressure? Have we stopped the increase in diabetes? Are there fewer people dying prematurely from NCDs?"

The importance of a multisectoral response, bringing everyone together to tackle NCDs, was reinforced by Mrs Jessie Schutt-Aine of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), who stressed that, "We need a whole-of-government and a whole-of-society approach; bringing together trade, agriculture, the food industry, health, education and other sectors. We need civil society, schools, churches: the entire community working together towards this common goal."

The all-of-society nature of a solid NCD response was reflected in the participants with, for example, the Barbados Minister of Industry, International Business and Commerce, the Hon. Donville Inniss, playing a leading role in proceedings. Talking of multisectorality, he noted, "We can't talk about chronic non-communicable diseases...without looking heavily at the factors that influence them...So the foods that we eat do have an impact on our health outcomes and the foods we eat are influenced by our accessibility to them which of course relates to the pricing of them which by extrapolation relates to government policy in terms of importation, rates of duty and taxation."

The Minister also shared with a rapt audience, including experts in health, economics, agriculture and town and country planning among others, the inside track on how best to get NCDs in general, and the Plan for Action in particular, higher on the political agenda.

Funded by the Canadian International Development Research Council (IDRC), the Port of Spain Declaration evaluation has been led by the University of the West Indies on behalf of CARICOM and PAHO. Dr Zee Leung of IDRC told the meeting that he was "very proud of the work the evaluation team is doing. A lot has been accomplished."

During the course of the workshop, participants explored a range of issues surrounding the Port of Spain Declaration's 27 ambitious commitments. The Plan for Action formulated focused on areas such as: diet, food and food security; reducing alcohol-related harm; tobacco control; physical activity and the built environment; promoting health in specific settings like workplaces and schools; financing NCD prevention and control; and advocacy and communication.

The gathering was seen as a golden opportunity to really make a difference in strengthening, broadening and deepening the NCD response in the Caribbean.

For more details go to www.posevaluation.org

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