

PRESS RELEASE

PAHO, HCC, OECS, UNICEF launch "Now More Than Ever" regional campaign promoting Front-of-Package Warning Labelling

Bridgetown, Barbados, 12 March 2021 – A ground-breaking campaign aimed at tackling the troubling issues of childhood obesity and the regional epidemic of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) was launched Friday by the Healthy Caribbean Coalition (HCC), in partnership with the Pan American Health Organisation (PAHO), the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) Commission and UNICEF.

Titled "Now More Than Ever: Better Labels, Better Choices, Better Health", the campaign seeks to both raise awareness of children's right to nutritious food and to mobilize public and policymaker support for adopting octagonal warning labels on the front of packaged products to facilitate healthier food decisions. Running until 17 April 2021, it will be rolled out across social media, digital media, and radio platforms in Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Member States.

Unhealthy diets, dominated by widely available and affordable processed foods, high in sugars, fats and salt, have been fuelling silent obesity and NCD epidemics in the region. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the vulnerability of persons living with NCDs, who are at higher risk of severe COVID-19, and placed tremendous strain on national and regional food systems. The campaign urges Caribbean policymakers to use COVID-19 as a springboard to prioritise action on NCDs and childhood obesity, emphasizing that children need nutritious foods in order to grow, learn and thrive.

UNICEF Representative for the Eastern Caribbean Area, Dr Aloys Kamuragiye, noted, "We need action on the pandemic and NCDs. We owe it to our children to give them the very best start in life – and that includes a healthy diet that helps them flourish intellectually and physically to achieve their best potential."

Dr Didacus Jules, OECS Director General, also contended that the response to COVID-19 presents an opportunity for better health overall. "Health resilience is not just about responding to the pandemic but also about recalibrating our lifestyles from one of unhealthy excess to organic and holistic healthy living. Growing what we eat and eating what we grow and public awareness of the content of what we consume are essential components of this."

The focus on *octagonal* front-of-package warning labelling is key. Various types of label exist but a recent regional study carried out in Jamaicaⁱ found that octagonal labels are the most effective. According to Dr Anselm Hennis, Director of PAHO's Department of Non-communicable Diseases and Mental Health, "There is robust evidence showing that octagonal warning labels are the best system to allow consumers to correctly, quickly and easily identify products that are high in sugars, fats and salt, and linked to NCDs and obesity."

Voting across CARICOM Member States to adopt the final draft of a CARICOM Regional Standard,ⁱⁱ which incorporates front-of-package warning labelling specifications, runs until 14 April 2021. If the Standard is approved and endorsed,ⁱⁱⁱ the Caribbean will join a growing number of countries fighting back against obesity and NCDs with warning label regulations protecting the rights of their citizens to know what is in their food.

Sir Trevor Hassell, HCC President, maintained that, “CARICOM leaders have committed to fast-tracking policies to address obesity in children and more broadly, poor diets and NCDs. As the voting takes place across the region, all Caribbean nationals are encouraged to call on their leaders to support octagonal front-of- package nutritional warning labels.”

According to the campaign, the Caribbean has a real opportunity to fight back against obesity and NCDs with this strong initiative driving public awareness, so informed and empowered Caribbean people can demand their right to better labels, better choices and, ultimately, better health.



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For more information visit our Partner webpages:

Healthy Caribbean Coalition: <https://www.healthycaribbean.org/now-more-than-ever-regional-campaign-promoting-front-of-package-warning-labelling/>

Pan American Health Organisation: <https://www.paho.org/en/front-package-warning-labeling-fopwl-caribbean>

OECS Commission: <https://www.oecs.org/en/>

UNICEF: <https://www.unicef.org>

The Partners:

Healthy Caribbean Coalition is the only regional NCD alliance of health and non-health civil society organizations. HCC, with over 100 members, works closely with regional and international leaders in NCD prevention and control to leverage the power of civil society by strengthening and supporting its membership in the implementation of programmes aimed at reducing the morbidity and mortality associated with NCDs.

The Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) is an International Inter-governmental Organisation dedicated to regional integration in the Eastern Caribbean and works across its programmatic areas and in all Member States to consolidate the single economic space for enhanced economic growth, social inclusion and environmental protection.

The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) works with the countries of the Americas to improve the health and quality of life of the population. Founded in 1902, it is the world's oldest international public health agency. It serves as the Regional Office for the Americas of WHO and is the specialised health agency of the Inter-American system.

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ⁱ Study led by the Ministry of Health and Wellness of Jamaica, the University of Technology, Jamaica, and PAHO.

ⁱⁱ The CARICOM Regional Standard for Specification for Labelling of Pre-packaged Foods.

ⁱⁱⁱ Once approved by at least three-quarters of Member States, the final draft Standard will be submitted to the CARICOM Council of Trade and Economic Development (COTED) for endorsement.