

CARPHA and ECLAC Collaboration
Remarks for Discussion
NCDs and Sustainable Development: The COVID-19 Factor
4th November, 2021

Good afternoon

Thank you for the opportunity to conclude the discussion on this critical topic for this panel; NCDs and Sustainable Development: The COVID-19 Factor. This timely collaboration between the Caribbean Public Health Agency (CARPHA) and the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) on this seminar is not just relevant. It was essential for the forecasting of some of preparations that regional and international Health and Development Agencies must take to help Ministries of Health cope with Caribbean Health sector challenges post COVID-19. I fear that the Caribbean is ill prepared for what will become the bread and butter recovery and rehabilitation work to get the survivors of COVID-19 to not only be functional but to enjoy the quality of life that the Caribbean has to offer..

All of this hinges on the undeniable fact that the Caribbean had an unacceptably high prevalence and incidence especially among young people of the NCDs and their risk factors. So now there exists a syndemic of the pandemics of the NCDs and COVID-19 that has exposed the gaps in programming, the inequities in national resources and the inherent vulnerabilities of those among us with NCDs in the Caribbean . We knew that pre-COVID-19 pandemic, Caribbean countries were off track for attaining the globally agreed commitments for NCDs in the Sustainable Development Goals. Now, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the COVID-19 variants are mercilessly highlighting this, the most vulnerable population, through giving them severe COVID-19 illness, and killing them even when they are fully vaccinated and setting up rehabilitation nightmares for Governments through the range of strange manifestations due to Long COVID..

It pains me that the Caribbean is in this state at this time. Not just because I hate to see avoidable illness and death but moreso because our political leaders had the foresight in 2007 to design the blueprint for improved NCD prevention and management and to mandate a road map for action , CARICOM Heads of Government committed to the first of its kind regional commitment (the Port of Spain declaration) to fight the NCDs epidemic and they

started a cascade of political interventions which made the world, stop and pay attention. This culminated in 2011, at the UN, with the World recognising that NCDs were one of the greatest challenges to health and development, only the second time in the UN history that a health problem was elevated to this level. The UN Political Declaration on NCDs 2011, was followed by the 2014 and 2018 reviews and declarations.

In 2015, for the first time, NCDs was included in the Sustainable Development Goals.

The challenges posed by NCDs to Sustainable Development are many. The failure of countries to prevent and reverse the rise in NCDs through policy interventions has made their populations more vulnerable in ways that transcend simple illness on a personal level and raise the sequelae to economic burdens and crises which reverse development gains. Just ponder on how the COVID-19 pandemic has rocked the tourism sector and almost bankrupted the economies of the CARICOM countries. The COVID-19 pandemic has further retarded progress to reduce premature mortality and incidence due to NCDs by:

- A) Increased death of persons with NCDs and their risk factors due to COVID-19 infection and
- B) The NCD burden is also increasing as a result of the complications due to COVID-19 infections, such as, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, mental illness and other conditions among others and
- C) As the Health services are consumed by managing the COVID response, the resources to manage the every day issues of NCDs and plan for expansion of the programmes have been less than optimal and the absence of health sector driven compliance and management is creating its own challenges .
- D) COVID-19 has also exacerbated Food and Nutrition Insecurity. Women, children, the elderly are particularly vulnerable to hunger and food insecurity indicators, especially given the reduction in household income from COVID-19.

Please recall that the major drivers of the response to NCDs lie largely outside of the health sector and a multisectoral approach, including the necessity for policy change and ring fenced budgeting to address sectoral action are the paradigm shifts required not just for Health but also for finance, industry, education, agriculture, trade and transport sectors.. There needs to be much more done at the intersections of health and these different sectors and even

more economic analysis of the interventions so that the maximum impact sectoral actions are financed from national budgets.

We must look to address inequities as a priority and move towards a holistic, whole of society approach towards addressing public health matters including NCDs and the health response, We can utilize lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic response to advance the NCD response as many of the tools required to fight the pandemic are similar, for example, national multisectoral action plans, coordination of response across sectors and quick changes in legislation development to protect the public's health.

Due to COVID-19 public health measures, there have been some innovations implemented by Caribbean Countries like telemedicine care, home delivery of meds which need to be re-evaluated. We also need to assess if the pre-pandemic burden of NCDs has changed and the effects of COVID-19 on the NCD response. All of this is in order to identify COVID-19 best practices that can be translated to upscaling the pre existing NCD response. As a result, the COVID-19 pandemic presents an opportunity to refocus on NCDs and health and rethink the response, recommit to a multisectoral way of fighting the epidemic and quadruple the measures if we are to achieve the SDGs.

This discourse on NCDs and SDGs is healthy (pun intended) and this collaboration with ECLAC should continue as we collectively clamour for whole of society efforts at achieving the SDGs AND for the Caribbean way of fighting NCDs simultaneously with COVID-19 to be recognised.

I thank you.