

For Immediate Release

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Sir Hilary supports Sugar Sweetened Drink tax

Renowned historian Professor Sir Hilary Beckles is commending the Mia Mottley administration for being one of the first governments in Barbados to truly "look out" for the health of Barbadians, with the recent increase in the excise tax on sugar sweetened beverages.

Adamant that such a move is necessary in moving the island towards ending its non-communicable disease (NCD) health crisis, the Vice Chancellor of the University of the West Indies recently added his voice to the chorus of those supporting the increase of the excise tax on SSBs from 10 percent to 20 percent. "I am very proud that the Government has taken these steps. I wish that we would have had governments in the past that look out for our public health in this way," he said as a guest on the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Barbados and the Barbados Childhood Obesity Prevention Coalition sponsored CBC Presents discussion program, 'A Conversation About Sugar in the Barbadian Society'. Sir Hilary painted the telling picture of how over hundreds of years, the black enslaved population was forced to consume large amounts of sugar, spawning not only an addiction for generations to come, but a NCD crisis of epidemic proportions.

Lamenting that now in the present day, half of the country's population over the age of 60 are either hypertensive, diabetic or both, he insisted the "public health catastrophe" has been largely as a result of our people's predilection for sugar. "If half of our seniors over the age of 60 are hypertensive or diabetic, that would mean that if you put us on a global scale with all the societies together, the black people in Barbados are among the sickest people in the world," he said. Sir Hilary underlined the time has come for sugar plantations to be converted into agricultural lands so that the current generation and those to come could eat healthier foods and turn the NCDs tide. Another guest, Economist Dr. Justin Ram described the \$750 million spent annually on treating NCDs as "unsustainable", remarking that the doubling of the SSB tax will not be enough.

"It has to be a much more comprehensive approach which requires educating the population from a very early age, encouraging different lifestyle choices and of course, making available other nutritious meals and things available to the average person," Dr. Ram insisted. Meanwhile, in her response to criticisms of the SSB tax, Minister in the Ministry of Health and Wellness with responsibility for NCDs, Dr. Sonia Browne stressed other areas are slated to be tackled to adjust dietary habits across the country. "While the attack from the naysayers are on the SSBs, and it is true that there are other aspects within the diet that play a role, we have to start somewhere, but there are other things coming incrementally that will make an impact to the health of Barbadians," she said, pointing to front of package warning labels and banning the marketing of unhealthy foods in schools.

When first introduced in Barbados in 2014, the SSB tax resulted in a 4.3 percent decrease in weekly SSB sales and a 7.5 percent increase in bottled water sales, with a similar situation occurring in Mexico, South Africa, the United Kingdom and the other 46 countries, cities and regions which have instituted such taxes. The Heart and Stroke Foundation of Barbados has long been advocating for that the World Health Organization recommended suite of policies to decrease childhood obesity levels in Barbados be instituted as a comprehensive approach. These evidence-based six-point policies include: the taxation of unhealthy foods and drinks; mandatory Front of Package Nutrition Labelling; enacting legislation related to the International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk substitutes; banning the marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages to children, banning the sale and marketing of unhealthy foods in schools and; mandatory physical activity in schools.

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