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For Immediate Release

Civil Society encourages Government to change tax structure on food imports to help Barbadians eat healthier

Civil Society is calling for healthier foods to be made more affordable by lowering tariffs on healthy food imports and placing higher tariffs on less healthy foods. This proposal follows recent analysis showing the import tax on healthier foods to be on average 10 per cent higher than on unhealthy food imports.

Concerned with the growing number of citizens being diagnosed with non-communicable diseases as a result of poor dietary choices, in 2022 the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Barbados Inc. (HSFB) commissioned the University of the West Indies Deputy Principal Professor Winston Moore and Lecturer, Dr Antonio Alleyne to examine whether food prices in this island are truly proving prohibitive to healthy eating and to recommend a policy approach to make healthy foods more affordable.

The policy proposal points out the significant contrast between the high tariffs attached to healthy food imports like fresh vegetables and fruits, in comparison to the low taxes placed on unhealthy food imports high in salt, sugar and fat, such as cookies, chips and ice cream. It clearly illustrates that on average, unhealthy foods carry an import tariff of 35 percent, while healthy foods are taxed at around 45 percent.

The policy proposal urges government to flip these tax rates, thereby allowing healthy foods to be sold at a much cheaper price.

According to Professor Moore, "In our island more than half of the population can be considered obese or at risk of being obese as well, and this is largely related to diet. What we have seen is that the choices that we make in relation to food are fundamentally related to the prices. The trend is that (as a people), we tend to go for cheaper foods, which tend to be the unhealthy ones. If we can make healthy foods cheaper, and make unhealthy foods more expensive, we hope that it makes it clear for consumers when they go into the supermarket, that they should make a switch, as it would be cheaper for them to consume healthier foods,"

The findings echo the results of the recently released United Nation's Food and Agriculture Organization's Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition in Latin America and the Caribbean 2022, which illustrates the high costs attached to healthy eating across the region and the preference therefore of low and middle income families to consume cheap, energy dense unhealthy foods instead.

The policy proposal highlights the steps taken by Mexico in increasing the excise tax on all imported energy-dense foods including salty snacks, chips, sweets, chocolates, cakes, pastries, and frozen desserts, and Chile's introduction of a "fat-tax" on high in fat and sugar imports, as examples Barbados can consider in developing its own plan to reduce unhealthy eating.



“In essence, by increasing the prices of unhealthy products, taxes can get people to consume less of them and improve nutrition and health. Healthcare costs would be lower, and people would live healthier longer lives. Governments could use the resulting revenue gains by helping low-income families or cutting other taxes,” Professor Moore adds.

The proposal goes even further by illustrating the benefits of local producers and manufacturers changing their own recipes by lowering the sugar, salt and fat content in the foods being produced.

“Some manufacturers will argue that there is a fall off on the local market when recipes change, and I understand this. However, if you explain to the public the benefits of the reduction and that it is better for you in the long run, it can go a long way. In addition, the manufacturers should see this as an opportunity to innovate and develop new products that can then be exported to other regions in the Caribbean. We need to innovate and try new products and use the domestic market as that testing market to then get into other markets in Latin America and Caribbean and internationally,” the economist asserts.

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