

# FINAL TECHNICAL REPORT INTERAMERICAN HEART FOUNDATION INC

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*IDRC GRANT / SUBVENTION DU CRDI : - BUILDING A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE FOR HEALTHY FOOD SYSTEMS IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN*

***For a healthy life: Latin American Workshop on NCDs  
Convening leaders of the Healthy Latin American Coalition—An Initiative of the  
InterAmerican Heart Foundation  
Panama, December 2-5, 2019***

**Executive summary:** The InterAmerican Heart Foundation (IAHF), an organization working to control heart diseases and related non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and its main risk factors, together with its initiative, the coalition named CLAS (Healthy Latin America Coalition, in Spanish), set out to advance civil society's action to prevent and control NCDs in Latin America, following up on the UN High level Meeting on NCDs 2018 and SDG commitments, aiming to strengthen national NCD Alliances. IAHF and CLAS organized and carried out a workshop that took place in Panama, December 2<sup>nd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup>, 2019. The workshop convened almost 100 key advocates and researchers from the region, representatives from ministries of health, the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), and international institutions. There was strong participation of people living with NCDs (PLWNCDs) and consumer organizations. The highly interactive workshop, which counted with the support of the Panama Ministry of Health, had as key objectives to develop a consensus in critical areas and help set a path forward for the region. Positions were defined in human rights, tobacco control, healthy food systems, reducing alcohol consumption, and integrating PLWNCDs in regional advocacy. A special session with organizations from Central America resulted in an agreement to establish a Central America NCD Alliance.

**National/regional context:** Latin America has advanced well in tobacco control and nutrition policies. But there is wide agreement among civil society leaders that there is a major push-back from the unhealthy products industry and it has become increasingly difficult to continue advancing at the same pace. We are not achieving our objectives in tobacco taxation and the regulation of publicity, promotion and sponsorship of tobacco products. There are concerns regarding the aggressive nature of marketing of new tobacco products, (namely e-cigarettes and heated tobacco products) to young people, and the challenges these new products represent to existing tobacco control policies. Regarding food systems, there have been successes in front-of-package warning labelling (FOPL), changes in school environments, and taxation of sugary sweetened beverages (SSBs). But again, many legislative proposals are languishing in countries with difficulties to move them forward. Alcohol control policies are in early stages of development while we are seeing increases in consumption in many countries of the region.

Participants at the Workshop discussed the political and economic crises in full force in many Latin American countries such as Venezuela, Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador, Colombia and Nicaragua, among others. Demonstrations against inequities and corruption have been highlighted as the source of regional discontent. These situations make it difficult to obtain media time to advance our objectives. At the same time some reliable donors, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and Bloomberg Philanthropies are reducing some of their investment in this region.

While the context is not propitious at this time, the resolve and commitment of civil society remains strong and determined. One way in which participants responded to the difficult

situation was by developing a Declaration on Human Rights as being fundamental to the prevention and control of NCDs.

**Overall aim:** to convene NCD Alliances and affiliated groups to discuss the situation in Latin America and how best to proceed to reach the 2030 Sustainable Development Goal (SDG): to reduce NCDs by 30% by 2030.

**Organization of the event:** The event took place according to plans and within the allocated budgets. Funding was provided by the IDRC project on healthy food systems to bring to Panama many researchers and advocates engaged in improving the nutritional environment. There was also funding from the NCD Alliance and the Ministry of Health of Panama, thanks to the intervention of Dr. Reina Roa. The IAHF and CLAS acted as the Organizing committee and there were at least 8 teleconferences and many e-mail exchanges to define the objectives, the agenda, the expected outcomes, and participants. The Project Team for The Community of Practice had opportunities to discuss and contribute to the development of the agenda and objectives. There was also much interaction with the Ministry of Health of Panama, which were the local organizers. Workshop overall evaluation average, in a scale of 1 to 5 with 5 being excellent, was 4.61.

**Objectives:** We aimed to have an exchange of experiences and concepts among key actors in the region, based on their knowledge and expert opinion, to reach consensus regarding critical areas necessary to advance the objective of reducing NCDs by 30% by 2030. Consensus documents were developed in several areas by small groups that then presented their conclusions to the rest of the audience for further revisions. The following consensus documents were completed and represent the strategies members will advance to meet the 2030 objectives:

1. Development of a Community of Practice in Healthy Food Systems
2. Prioritizing Front of Package Warning Labels in our region
3. Tobacco control strategies
4. Reducing the consumption of Alcohol
5. Position to promote greater integration of PLWNCDs at the regional level
6. Declaration on human rights as a fundamental rationale for advancing NCD prevention and control

**Posters:** Several participants wished to present specific projects and programs implemented in their countries. For this purpose, we set up a space for posters. There were approximately 10 posters in this area. Organized and managed by FIC Bolivia advocates Karina Garrón and Pamela Cortez.

**Emerging themes.** Aligned with the strengthening of the role of PLWNCDs, this workshop emphasized the importance of addressing inequalities in accessing health services to prevent and control NCDs. Verónica Schoj supported this effort given her significant role in hypertension control in Argentina at the primary care level. This theme encompassed a look at diabetes and obesity, smoking cessation, and the expected changes in primary care services to incorporate digital methods, decision-making support and precision medicine. Access to healthcare and medicines is part of the package of strategies required to reach the 2030 SDG goal.

**Representative participants.** The workshop was highly interactive and required representation from a variety of sectors. There were researchers from academic institutions such as University of Chile, University of South Carolina, and the Institute for Clinical Effectiveness of Buenos Aires. There were civil society advocates from health NGOs, consumer organizations and patient groups. In attendance were also representatives from the Ministries of Health of Panama, Costa Rica and Argentina. From the Pan American Health Organization, we had country NCD focal points (Panama, Mexico, Argentina and Guatemala) and representatives from the central office in Washington DC: Adriana Blanco, Pedro Ordúñez, Ignacio Ibarra and Maristela Monteiro. Additionally, we had representatives from UNICEF, American Heart Association, International Development Research Center (IDRC), NCD Alliance, Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids CTFK, Bloomberg Advocacy Incubator, Action for Smoking on Health (ASH), The Union, STOP Tobacco Initiative, and Framework Convention Alliance (FCA). Given PAHO's financial constraints, the cost of attendance for PAHO representatives was borne by the workshop budget. From Panama we had approximately 11 participants from the Ministry of Health and about 17 from civil society.

#### **Main highlights:**

**1. Launch of the Community of Practice in Healthy Food Systems.** This meeting in Panama served as the first face-to-face meeting for the project team as well as the launching of the project for the NCD community more generally. It provided the opportunity to develop further various concepts regarding the Community of Practice and an initial position statement on Front of Package Labeling, a topic that is to demonstrate the usefulness of the community.

**2. Strengthening Central America civil society.** As the meeting took place in Panama, it provided an opportunity to engage civil society and allies from the Central American region. A special meeting took place on December 5<sup>th</sup>, 2019 to bring this group together. There was agreement in seeking to organize a Central American NCD coalition with the objective of building capacity in this region, exchange information, and support each other in efforts to advance health policies. It was agreed to invite and engage other leaders from other countries of this region that were not in attendance. National coalitions were viewed as critical to the advocacy effort and we have already initiated coalitions in Guatemala and Costa Rica. As per agreement with the Panamanian Ministry of Health, we also initiated the organization of an NCD Alliance in Panama, whose first meeting took place Jan 23, 2020. Particularly important was the presence of experienced advocates and PAHO representatives that wish to support Central American colleagues, including Eduardo Bianco, Luz Myriam Reynales, Miguel Asqueta, Laís Amaral and Ana Paula Bortoletto. PAHO legal counsel Ignacio Ibarra explained why the argument that individual countries cannot advance health strategies until the region develops common methods is erroneous. He detailed Central American treaties and noted that each country is sovereign and does not have to wait to “harmonize” proposals with other countries to advance and promote the health of its own population.

**3. Incorporating more fully Consumer organizations and national alliances.** There were many consumer organizations present and willing to work together with CLAS to advance NCD prevention and control. These included El Salvador CDC (Center for the Defense of Consumers), the Panamanian Institute for Consumer Rights, Consumidores Panama, Argentine Consumers,

IDEC from Brazil, and Educar Consumidores from Colombia. Regrettably one of the most significant consumer organizations in the region, “El Poder del Consumidor” from Mexico, was not in attendance due to urgent legislative developments in their country. These groups have other priorities in addition to health, but they have welcomed working together with other members of CLAS.

**4. Organizing a Regional coalition of People Living with NCDs (PLWNCDs).** While some countries in our region, notably Mexico, have advanced in the participation and integration of PLWNCDs to promote health, the regional coalition had not. Their voices at this workshop were loud and helped all understand the importance of their involvement and leadership.

**5. Introducing issues around equitable access to healthcare.** It is difficult to consider incorporating PLWNCDs meaningfully without addressing the great disparities that exist in our region in terms of access to healthcare and essential medicines. The discussion on this issue brought to the forefront the relationship between risk factors and conditions that lead to morbidity and mortality from NCDs.

**6. Strengthen Human Rights as a tool to justify and forward effective strategies.** One way that advocates and civil society organizations can act is through country-level treaty reporting. There are several international human rights treaties on topics that are relevant to the prevention and control of NCDs, such as tobacco control, adequate nutrition, health promotion, and countries are obligated to report to those treaties’ committees about the human rights situation in their countries. However, those reports seldom include the issues relevant to NCDs. The reports are submitted to the Committee for each treaty, which in turn makes recommendations back to the country who submitted the report. Advocates can submit reports to draw each treaty committees’ attention to the way NCDs harm the populations the treaties are bound to protect. Human rights treaties provide important justification for ensuring that governments take action to improve health, as bound by the treaties, without interference from industries that produce unhealthy products such as tobacco, alcohol, ultra-processed foods and sugar-sweetened beverages.

**7. Dysfunctions in the relationship between government and civil society.** There was an important dialogue regarding the uneasy relationship between civil society and governments. Many times, civil society is responsive to donors over and above the urgent needs of governments, i.e., funding needs distort civil society priorities. There is a lack of sincere dialogue between the parts and there are few spaces that allow for frank communications. Even when Ministries of Health are allies, the timing of actions by civil society might be off. Each seems not to understand the circumstances and roles of the other. Civil society needs to be non-partisan but many times it favors working with those who are politically aligned with their views. Within any administration there are a variety of political opinions and might be possible to advance. There are many non-serious NGOs that consume the time of government officials, who are then weary of receiving serious NGOs. Government officials sometimes do not take civil society organizations seriously and sub estimate the importance of the information they present. The situation presented at the Workshop indicated a need to strengthen the relationship between governments and civil society and build capacity for joint action.

**Media and social media coverage/impact:** An expert in communications from FIC Argentina, Camila Chidiak, was given the responsibility of addressing public relations and media issues associated with the Panamá workshop. She developed a Google file, available to participants, with information about the workshop and a model press release to support national objectives. The materials may be found here:

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1RI12eW582zjb4jq74Ux4qg2xLqIxrBT2?usp=sharing>

There were many posts on social media and the Ministry of Health featured the event in its website.

**Meaningful involvement of PLWNCDs:** Under the leadership of CLAS member Juan Núñez and patient leader Jaime Barba, the Panama workshop incorporated a day-long discussion on the meaningful involvement of PLWNCDs. Despite limited resources for this segment of the workshop, we were able to incorporate patient leaders from Costa Rica, Mexico, USA and many from Panama. The rich discussion concluded with a position statement and proposal for CLAS to develop a regional Chapter for PLWNCDs to promote the empowerment of PLWNCDs and their integration in CLAS' advocacy work. The initial objectives for this new Chapter include: amplifying the voices of patients and primary caretakers and health professionals; strengthening patient coalitions in each country of the region; building capacity and leadership among these groups; supporting their role in monitoring and evaluating government action plans; participating in regional coalition decision making; identifying and training PLWNCDs as spokespersons; act to avoid discrimination of PLWNCDs; promote fiscal policies to reduce consumption of unhealthy products. For immediate communications, a WhatsApp group of participants living with NCDs was created and is currently active.

**Next steps:**

1. Develop a Community of Practice to improve research, advocacy and policy in health food systems in Latin America and the Caribbean. There is funding for that purpose from IDRC for 2 ½ years.
2. Follow up to strengthen NCD alliances in Central America, particularly Guatemala, Costa Rica, and Panama. Initiate coalition to support capacity building and information exchange in Central America, including NCD focal points from the Pan American Health Organization. Initial meetings are scheduled for Panamá and Central America in January 2020. Costa Rica Saludable (Healthy Costa Rica) is having its first face-to-face meeting in San José on Jan 29<sup>th</sup>.
3. Develop an agenda for discussion at the NCD Alliance Forum in Sharjah on February 9, 2020. Aim to advance positions and define strategies and actions for the next few years.
4. Operationalize the human rights tools discussed at the Workshop to pilot its usefulness and ability to promote government action through civil society reports to human rights treaties' reviews.
5. Engage more strongly with efforts to increase equity in the access to health services for the prevention and control of NCDs.

## Supportive materials

1. All ppt presentations for the NCD Workshop Dec 2-5, 2019 can be found here:

<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/9mxoq5zttcxmobq/AAAPGA7hfc6UOI9Emhmn69pQa?dl=0>

2. Press release, photos and information to disseminate about the workshop can be found here:

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1RI12eW582zbi4jq74Ux4qq2xLqIxrT2?usp=sharing>

### EXHIBITS AVAILABLE ON REQUEST

Workshop Agenda

Workshop concept

Evaluation form

Tobacco

Alcohol

Health food systems

Front of Package Warning labels

Participation of PLWNCDs

Declaration on Human Rights

Roster of participants

Communications Plan

Central American meeting notes