

THE GREATEST WEALTH IS HEALTH

An Interview with Mr. David Neilands, Director, HSF

**“Pepper bun hot but it
good fi curry”**

Caribbean proverb

**Translation: “Harsh
advice may be good for
you”**

It seemed only fitting that in discussing a project related to food and drink and the correlation with childhood obesity that we find a Caribbean proverb associated with food. Today we sit down with Mr. David Neilands, Director with the HSF and retired Managing Director of Super Centre Ltd (now one of the Massy supermarkets). Mr. Neilands is also a long standing member of the Non Communicable Disease Commission.

Within minutes of sitting down with David Neilands you can sense his passion for food and its cultural, social and economic significance in the Caribbean. As a supermarket industry veteran, he is acutely aware of how the sale and promotion of unhealthy foods and sugar sweetened beverages affects consumer behaviour and he

choices. “How little or how much do our children know about what grows here in Barbados and what is good for you,” questions David. He argues that education is key and a nutrition component should be added to the primary school curriculum. This is a sentiment echoed by the Caribbean Public Health Agency (CARPHA) during a



According to the Centre for Disease Control (CDC), having healthy food available and affordable in food retail and food service settings allows people to make healthier food choices.

has lobbied over the years for the introduction of more measures to guide people in the direction of healthier

meeting with the NCD Commission.



“We can’t change the world in a day but if we can change it gradually and get people to think, particularly young people, that would be an incredible step forward.”

“Many young people see items like root crops as things that Granny forced them to eat. We have an opportunity to show them that food like that not only tastes good but is also good for you. In this regard he specifically mentions breadfruit, highlighting its versatility and numerous health benefits. “We have an opportunity to grow breadfruit commercially and to promote other indigenous foods,” implores David, “the Barbados Agricultural Development and Marketing Corporation (BADMC) has done a wonderful job with items like Carmeta’s range of flours (breadfruit, cassava, sweet potato) and their breadfruit and pork sausage is absolutely delicious.”

Another interesting suggestion is the endorsement by HSFB of healthier items on supermarket shelves. This could have positive societal health and economic impacts and presents an opportunity for exciting new local products. He uses the example of an olive oil

“We need to understand that there is a health issue crippling the country - we all should have a conscience about what’s happening”

spread by Robert’s Manufacturing which is comparative with imported product Olivio. “We must recognise that we are building NCD patients as teenagers, adolescents and toddlers. This is not only a health and social problem but an economic one for business.”

David emphasizes that if people understand there is a market for healthier options then they will come on board. There need to be economic alternatives. He also uses this rationale when addressing the issue of the sale of sugar sweetened beverages and unhealthy foods in the school environment.



Although he is in favour of an outright ban of these items, he stresses that it has to be approached carefully and consideration must be given to every stakeholder. So for instance, with respect to the vendors plying their trade outside the school gates you have to look at how to engage them and how to safeguard their livelihood, while also persuading them to move towards offering healthier options e.g. natural juices with no added sugar.

There is also a need to engage the beverage and fast food companies regarding the marketing and promotion of products in schools. They have to be persuaded to create healthier menus and to clearly highlight nutritional content. This would all be part of a multi-faceted approach to childhood obesity prevention.

At a government level, David recommends that cross fertilization of ministers is integral and there needs to be more of that happening. Focusing on the school environment means that the Ministry of Education must be involved alongside the Ministry of Health and Wellness. Building on the recommendation of adding nutrition to the curriculum, the school represents the ideal environment to promote more than academics and engage more youth in activities and professions like farming. This would then include the Ministry of Agriculture.

The overarching message is that childhood obesity is a monumental issue with no magic fix. We all have a responsibility when it comes to prevention; the time to act is now and we must do more. Barbados has been recognized globally for introducing

taxation on sugar sweetened beverages. At present the tax is 10%, however, the WHO recommends a minimum of 20% in order to be effective. David agrees that taxation is the way to go and he references Mexico as a best practice example. He cautions that while he agrees with increased taxation on sugar sweetened beverages, assurances must be given that the revenue generated will be used to support small businesses producing healthier alternatives. This could be through training, adoption of ISO standards and other similar efforts.

In David's words, **"We are all in the same boat so we all have to understand the right way to go."**