

Promoting Healthy Diets and Lifestyles in Dominica, Grenada, Saint Lucia, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines

Summary

Given the interest of the four Caribbean countries, FAO worked closely with them to develop national food-based dietary guidelines (FBDGs) to promote healthy diets and lifestyles in Dominica, Grenada, Saint Lucia and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. Through their involvement in activity planning, training, field testing with the public and broad consultations, each country developed its own set of FBDGs, which became national policies.

The factors influencing the success of the intervention were:

Commitment to global initiatives. The interest of the four countries in developing FBDGs came from their adherence to the World Declaration and Plan of Action for Nutrition in 1992.

National ownership. The FBDGs were prepared by the countries, and not by outsiders, through the engagement of multisectoral committees and national task teams.

Identification of local/national “champions”. Champions were identified to serve as national coordinators.

A phased approach. The FBDGs were developed through a ten-step process.

Creation of informal networks. “Intra-country” workshops reinforced the existing regional network of Caribbean nutritionists.

Training methodologies. Training was comprised of theoretical and practical elements.

Community participation. The intervention involved people from the communities to seek their views of different nutrition messages.

Keywords: *food-based dietary guidelines, nutrition education, diet-related chronic diseases, nutrition communication.*

1. Context

During the past 20 years, the Caribbean region has experienced a sharp decline in child mortality and malnutrition and increases in life expectancy. With populations living longer, there are higher risks of non-communicable diseases such as cardiovascular disease, hypertension, diabetes and cancer. All of these diseases are linked to “common risk” factors related to lifestyle – such as obesity, physical inactivity, poor nutrition and tobacco use.

Since the 1970s, there has been an increase in the availability of kilocalories (kcal) per person in the Caribbean, with higher intakes of meats, fatty foods and refined carbohydrates. However, consumption of fruits and vegetables remains inadequate. Eating away from home is more common and physical activities are less frequent. These factors contribute to poor health.

FAO and the World Health Organization (WHO) began promoting the concept of food-based dietary guidelines (FBDGs) following the International Conference on Nutrition in 1992, when the “World Declaration and Plan of Action for Nutrition” called upon governments to

promote appropriate diets and healthy lifestyles. Following the conference, Caribbean governments adopted their own National Plans of Action for Nutrition (NPANs).

In 1999 FAO held a workshop “Development of FBDGs and Nutrition Education for the Caribbean” in Bridgetown, Barbados to promote the idea of national dietary guidelines in line with each country’s NPAN. The workshop was in response to a request by the Grenadian government.

2. Capacity development intervention

Following a mission by FAO Nutrition Officers to Grenada and regional discussions held with the Caribbean Food and Nutrition Institute,¹ a Technical Cooperation Programme² was formulated. The programme included several countries of the region whose nutrition problems were similar: Dominica, Grenada, Saint Lucia, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines.

The capacity development intervention was shaped around two phases: (i) planning and organizing the work; and (ii) developing the FBDGs in steps.

(i) Planning and organizing the work

An important aspect in the design of the intervention was that the FBDGs were prepared by the countries and not by outsiders.

Each government appointed a nutritionist within a specific ministry to serve as **national coordinator** and to take the major responsibility for leading the project. In Dominica, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and the Environment oversaw the project. In Grenada, the Ministry of Agriculture, Lands and Fisheries; in Saint Lucia, the Ministry of Health, Human Services and Family Affairs; and in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, the Ministry of Health and the Environment.

Four intra-country training workshops were conducted with the national coordinators and expert consultants. Each country hosted one of the workshops. The workshops provided technical training in nutrition assessment, field research to develop culturally appropriate and practical public messages, detailed planning and budgeting exercises, and communication strategy planning.

A crucial part of the process was the formation of multi-sectoral national committees which were comprised of key stakeholders from the public sector (health, education, agriculture etc.), academia and the private sector. Their main task was to appoint a national task force to guide the process of developing the national FBDGs.

(ii) Developing the FBDGs

The development of the FBDGs by the national task forces followed nine steps: identifying the target group for the dietary guidelines; setting the objectives; preparing technical guidelines; testing the feasibility of recommendations; finalizing the FBDGs; validation; correction and adjustment of the FBDGs; implementation; and evaluation.

¹ A centre of the Pan American Health Organization.

²TCP/RLA/3002 “Capacity Building for the Development of Food-Based Dietary Guidelines to Promote Healthy Diets and Lifestyles”. Initially, the project was to begin in 2004 and end in 2005; however, a severe hurricane and other logistical complications led to extension of the project, which was completed in June 2007.

In order to characterize the target group, a situation analysis was undertaken to identify problems and set priorities. The national teams conducted qualitative studies using focus-group methodologies to obtain information on the dietary habits of the population. The teams were trained in the use of this type of methodology.

The training involved both theoretical and practical aspects and enabled participants to design and conduct focus groups discussions on the collected information. The results of these studies were presented to the multi-sectoral committees of each country. Committee members were asked to prioritize the issues that should be addressed in the FBDGs. Based on these priority areas, nutrition personnel set the general objectives for the FBDGs. Subsequently, nutrition experts defined the technical recommendations and developed a technical document³ providing the scientific basis that supported the guidelines.

The recommendations were tested through behavioural trials. This step included the design of the field study methodology, the training in field methods for household trials, and the collection and analysis of data. The results of the behavioural trials were then reviewed by an intra-country workshop in order to define the communication strategy and tools needed to implement the FBDGs. Draft guidelines were prepared as well as motivational messages for the general public and submitted to national multi-sectoral committees for approval. The motivational messages were validated with focus groups and refined based on advice from communication experts. Additional technical reviews were undertaken by the multi-sectoral committees. Finally, to implement the guidelines, a communication strategy and educational material were developed.

Box 1. A participatory approach

The project was funded by FAO, with nutrition officers from the Sub-regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean and the Nutrition and Consumer Protection Service providing technical and operational support. Nutritionists from the Pan American Health Organization's Caribbean Food and Nutrition Institute (CFNI) and the Institute of Nutrition of Central America and Panama (INCAP) served as trainers and advisors in the project. Within each country, national committees were formed that involved the major stakeholders and others who could lend support to the process of developing and implementing FBDGs. Besides the lead ministries, the ministries of education, chambers of commerce, marketing boards, bureaus of standards, youth organizations, universities, church organizations and media associations participated in developing and promoting the FBDGs.

3. Results

Through this intervention, each country developed a national FBDG, which provided recommendations that are short, simple and compelling for the populations. The recommendations encourage consumption of food items that are affordable and accessible to the average household. They also promote the use of local foods, which can help develop markets for local producers.

In each country, the Parliament or Prime Minister's Office formally adopted the FBDGs, signaling the seriousness of the effort. After the FBDGs were developed, each country carried out a launch, with a range of public announcements and activities to raise awareness of the FBDGs.

³ This document was geared toward health and nutrition professionals and not the general public.

The intervention helped the staff in the national nutrition units to update their skills and build new capacities in communication and community nutrition. The training in the use of qualitative methods for obtaining information about the public's understanding of the nutrition education messages was particularly valuable. These methods enabled nutrition units to obtain information quickly and relatively inexpensively. The nutrition materials produced in the project (posters, booklets, songs, radio and television spots) use everyday language and symbols that are relevant to the average person. The field studies also sensitized the national staff to the numerous challenges that people face when trying to adopt healthier lifestyles. For instance, the common finding that fruits and vegetables were not accessible to many households had implications for food policies and food producers.

4. Critical factors leading to successful capacity development

The factors influencing the success of the intervention were:

Commitment to global initiatives

The effort to develop FBDG in the four countries was the result of the International Conference on Nutrition of 1992. Following the conference, each country developed NPANs. Thus, the development of national FBDGs was the major activity emanating from the NPAN.

National ownership

The participatory process was the foundation of the intervention. National stakeholders, organized into multi-sectoral committees and task teams, were the main actors in leading and implementing the process. This ensured ownership and commitment towards a common objective.

Identification of local/national "champions"

National coordinators were identified to serve as champions of the FBDGs. The coordinators are known in their countries as authorities on nutrition matters. They were drawn from the ministries of health and agriculture and were all nutritionists by profession.

Strengthening networks

The nutritionists who served as national coordinators also participate in regional networks of Caribbean nutritionists. Through these networks, they could disseminate information about the FBDGs and the knowledge they gained from the project. The intra-country workshops were also an occasion to strengthen the existing networks.

Training methodologies

The intervention employed two types of training – intra-country workshops and training within each country. The training included both theoretical and practical aspects; for example, experts visited each country to train national staff in methods for collecting information at the household level in order to gain an understanding of the public's knowledge, attitudes and practices in relation to food consumption.

Phased approach

The development of the FBDGs was organized into a phased approach, from joint planning with national stakeholders to assessing the national nutrition situations, identifying and prioritizing problems to be addressed, building support among key stakeholders, creating and

testing communication messages and planning and implementing communication strategies.
Community participation

This project involved people from the communities, who were asked their views of different nutrition messages. In Grenada, parents, students and school staff were organized to discuss ways to improve the food that is made available in secondary schools.

5. Lessons learned

Support from senior government officials was essential to push the process. FBDGs needed to be viewed as part of the national policy in order to obtain political support. However, it is important to note that FBDGs did not belong to an official group or political party, as they were based on the needs and perspectives of the population.

The governments provided national staff and facilities for the project. FAO provided funds for training, meetings and materials. There is a risk that the activities will not be sustained in the sense that producing and disseminating public information materials is costly. FAO paid for the production of the first set of materials, but the countries will have to raise funds to reprint or to produce new materials.

The process required significant amount of staff time. The ministries involved in the FBDG process needed to allocate staff for this.

5. Further reading and information

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Nutrition information, communication & education Website

<http://www.fao.org/ag/humannutrition/nutritioneducation/49739/en/642354633/>