

## **VIRTUAL WEBINAR: PROMOTING SCHOOL ENVIRONMENTS FOR**

### **HEALTHY EATING AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY**

#### **CONCEPT NOTE**

#### **BACKGROUND**

Worldwide obesity has nearly tripled since 1975. In just 40 years, the number of school-age children and adolescents with obesity has risen more than 10-fold, from 11 million to 124 million (2016 estimates). In addition, an estimated 216 million were classified as overweight but not obese. In comparison with other World Health Organization (WHO) Regions, the prevalence of overweight and obesity is highest in the Americas (in 2016, 62% for overweight in both sexes and 28.6% for obesity, in adults over 18 years of age).

Available data show that, in the Americas, 33.6% of children and adolescents 5-19 years old are overweight and 14.4% are obese. In Latin America, 7% of the children under 5 years of age (5.4 million) are estimated to be overweight.

In response to this epidemic, many countries in the Americas have sought to change norms and adopted regulations, including:

- Legislation and national policies to protect, promote and support breastfeeding practices, such as the implementation of the International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes, the Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative, and maternity protection regulations;
- New school nutrition policies, with many focusing on improving the school food environment, particularly foods sold and served in schools, and the school physical activity environment;
- Improvements in national school feeding programs, as in the case of Brazil, Mexico, and others. Brazil now requires that at least 70% of food provided to students be natural or minimally processed and that a minimum of 30% of the school budget be used to buy foods from local family farmers;
- Promoting fiscal policies and front-of-package labeling and regulation of marketing of food to children;
- Other intersectoral areas such as family farming; and
- Promotion of physical activity through “open streets” programs.

The Inter-American Task Force (IATF) is a strategic alliance of inter-American organizations and associated international institutions and agencies led by the Pan American Organization (PAHO), to promote the prevention and control of noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) in the Americas through collaboration across various sectors of government. The IATF brings together the capacity and expertise of partner organizations working with different government sectors to reduce the burden of NCDs in the Americas.

The work of the IATF has proven to contribute to garnering greater political commitment for multi-sector interventions through the achievement of the approval of an NCD resolution by the General Assembly of the Organization of American States (OAS), which reinforces country commitments for a multi-sector NCD response. This resolution is expected to strengthen PAHO’s role and extend IATF collaboration on NCDs at regional and country levels.

Through the collaboration over the past four years, IATF member organizations have identified potential synergies in multi-sector NCD actions and our shared agenda for school health:

- PAHO Plan of Action on Prevention of Obesity in Children and Adolescents 2014-2019;
- OAS Inter-American Education Agenda (IEA) and its Plan of Action of Antigua and Barbuda 2019-2022. This is the platform for introducing health and nutrition interventions in the school policies and settings;
- World Bank School Health Governance Assessment tool “HEALTHY – SABER” (SABER); and;
- IICA Family Farms to Schools Initiative.

Promoting healthy school settings was raised as one of the proposed joint activities. PAHO has been working with OAS to introduce actions on school-based interventions in the IEA. The 2019-2022 Work Plan of the Inter-American Committee on Education (CIE), approved by the Committee on Partnership for Development Policies during the meeting held July 10, 2020, includes an activity to *coordinate with PAHO on the implementation of actions in the countries of the region for the promotion, monitoring, and evaluation of school environments conducive to prevention of non-communicable diseases in Latin America and the Caribbean.*

It further states that *PAHO and the members of the Inter-American Working Group on Noncommunicable Diseases are particularly focusing, in their implementation of the Plan of Action for the Prevention of Obesity in Children and Adolescents, on the promotion, monitoring, and evaluation of school environments conducive to healthy eating and physical activity, as well as strengthening the teaching profession through the inclusion of training opportunities related to food, nutrition, health, and physical activity, in the Inter-American Catalogue of Studies and Training Opportunities for Teachers.*

PAHO has also prepared a proposal for joint action with IATF members on school-based policies and interventions to reduce obesity in children and adolescents.

In the current context of the COVID-19 pandemic, it becomes even more relevant to integrate healthy diets into the school environment, nutrition education, and the learning and development objectives of school children.

With the approval of the 2019-2022 Work Plan of the Inter-American Committee on Education (CIE), OAS and PAHO will now initiate the implementation of the activities through a webinar to share some of the experiences *on the promotion, monitoring, and evaluation of school environments conducive to healthy eating and physical activity.*

Proposed participants include selected representatives of ministries of education (technical staff responsible for school feeding or physical activity and political staff responsible for norms and standards of school environments) and ministries of health (working on school health and nutrition).

The webinar will include a panel discussion and three working groups, where participants will discuss success factors and challenges in implementing policies and interventions in improving school environments for healthy eating and physical activity. Each group is led by a facilitator and a particular theme is discussed. At the end of the session, facilitators gather concluding remarks to then be shared with all participants and participants will suggest topics and priorities to be addressed through the OAS-PAHO collaboration.