



Mobilizing for Dietary Salt Reduction Policies and Strategies in the Americas: Expert & Country Consultation



(Miami, Florida, 13–14 January 2009)

The Expert and country consultation on salt reduction policies was organized and funded together with WHO Collaborating Centre for NCD Policy located within the Public Health Agency of Canada ([PHAC](#)) as a follow-up of the last [Policy Observatory](#) meeting in [Montreal](#) on priority topics for 2009.

Meeting Organization: The meeting was organized to include presentations, panels, question-and-answer (Q&A) sessions, and group discussions.

Participants: Participants included leading experts from the United Kingdom (UK) (Graham MacGregor,) Australia (Bruce Neal), Canada (Norm Campbell) and the United States (Drawin Labarthe, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention / [CDC](#)) and [WHO Headquarters](#). Also present were representatives from the countries (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Mexico, Paraguay, and Uruguay); the Caribbean Food and Nutrition Institute ([CFNI](#), a PAHO Pan American Center), the Inter American Heart Foundation ([IAHF](#)), and representatives from the food industry: [Fargo Argentina](#) (a subsidiary of Grupo Bimbo), the Grocery Manufacturers Association ([GMA](#)) of the United States, and the [Kellogg Company](#). The Institute of Nutrition of Central America and Panama ([INCAP](#), also a PAHO Pan American Center) was invited but unable to participate.

Materials

Prior to the meeting, a **questionnaire** was distributed to the [CARMEN](#) Member Countries to obtain country data on salt consumption, as well as information on existing programs and initiatives. Preliminary results from the questionnaire were presented at the meeting. A background paper on global, regional, and country initiatives was also prepared for the purpose of raising awareness among both the general public and health professionals in the countries on the topic of salt reduction policies.

Two **WHO reports** on the subject were also distributed and used as references during the meeting:

- [Salt as a Vehicle for Fortification: Report of a WHO Expert Consultation \(Luxembourg, 21–22 March 2007\)](#)
- [Less salt, less risk of heart disease and stroke: Reducing salt intake in populations \(WHO Forum and Technical Meeting on Reducing Salt Intake in Populations\)](#)

Activities, First Day

The first day of the consultation was dedicated to gaining knowledge **on the importance of salt reduction policies** for preventing chronic noncommunicable diseases, and on advances made in salt reduction policies. This included the experiences of the UK, currently the global leader in salt reduction policies, followed those of Australia, Canada, and Argentina.

The **epidemiology situation in the Region and the impact of chronic diseases related to high salt intake** showed information gaps but clearly demonstrated the high burden of hypertension and cardiovascular diseases (CVDs) attributable to salt. Where data are available, consumption levels are around 2 to 4 times the maximum levels recommended by expert panels, and 20 to 50 times more than are necessary for health.

Panels on current initiatives led by governments (national task forces, food labeling legislation), the food industry, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) concluded the day. Canada has just launched a Task Force on Dietary Salt Reduction; it was estimated that in Canada, for example, the prevalence of hypertension could be reduced by a million persons, with a possible cost savings of US\$ 300 million to US\$ 1 billion by implementing salt consumption levels of 5 gm per day. The United States has also just launched a major commission led by the Institute of Medicine ([IOM](#)) on salt reduction (launched on January 13.)

Activities, Second Day

The second day was dedicated to **discussions and consensus-building on next steps** to be taken with regard to the role of and initiatives from international agencies and governments, as well as from civil society and the private sector e.g. industry.

The example was the work of the *Trans Fat Free Americas* initiative, which was repeatedly cited as a good example from which lessons for salt reduction could be taken.

The issue of **salt as source for fortification by iodine and fluoride** in the Region of the Americas was brought up, with mention of the corresponding WHO recommendations.

The **need for better data on salt consumption in the countries** was highlighted as both urgent and important (e.g. 24-hour urinary studies). Country-level information is also needed on the main sources, in order to construct a better case for salt consumption reduction policies in the Americas and to more accurately model impact and cost savings. (From the industrialized countries, current information shows that 70 to 80% of salt consumption comes from processed food using industrial salt, e.g. without micronutrients.)

Conclusions

The meeting concluded with PAHO, PHAC, and the country participants making a **commitment to work on creating greater visibility of the issue**, since salt is not only a problem for people with hypertensive disease but also a problem of the entire population; moreover, even a modest reduction in population salt intake results in a major improvement in public health.

It was agreed that **dietary salt reduction is one of the most cost-effective public measures available, and one that is relatively feasible** in collaboration with industry and governments. However, it is not well appreciated how huge a contribution salt makes to the burden of chronic noncommunicable diseases (CNCDs). It is important to educate both the public and policy-makers, as well as industry.

It was agreed to **put the topic on the regional and subregional agendas**, to look for national and regional advocates and champions, and to work on standardizing information. Information was also provided on **opportunities for promotion** through organization such as SLAN (the *International Latin American Congress on Nutrition* held in November 2009 in Chile) and such new actors as the Food and beverage Alliance formed by six largest food and beverage companies, which cover 80% of world market, and SALCA, the South American consumer association.

Recommendations

1. **Dietary salt is a very strategic issue for PAHO and its Member Countries.** An active effort to reduce salt consumption should be made as part of the PAHO [*Regional Strategy on Chronic Disease Prevention and Control*](#), and lessons should be learned from the *Trans Fat Free Americas* initiative.
2. There should be follow-up with PAHO technical areas and PHAC on **convening a Regional Task Force on Salt Reduction Policies**, and on improving the assessment of the situation as part of developing a more detailed plan for 2009–2010, to include policy recommendations and targets.
3. **The country participants present and the CARMEN network should be considered as primary networks for distributing all materials** related to salt, which should be translated into Spanish and Portuguese.
4. **Internal awareness should be raised on the importance of salt reduction policies**, e.g. a technical discussion session within the PAHO Health Surveillance and Disease Management Area with online information-sharing via Elluminate.
5. **Specific issues and targets should be included within the objectives of the Partners' Forum.**