About the Journal
The Pan American Journal of Public Health is the scientific and technical periodical of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO). Published since 1922, it is one of the longest-running journals dedicated to the promotion of public health in the Region of the Americas. Published in English, Spanish and Portuguese, it is a free-access, peer-reviewed and monthly online journal.

Its mission is to serve as an important vehicle for disseminating scientific public health information of international significance, mainly in areas related to PAHO’s essential mission to strengthen national and local health systems and improve the health of the peoples of the Americas. It aims to bridge the gap between policy-makers, researchers, health professionals, and practitioners.

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About PAHO
The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) is an international agency composed of the States and territories of the Americas. Its secretariat, the Pan American Sanitary Bureau, is also the Regional Office of the World Health Organization (WHO) for the Americas, and its mission is to cooperate technically with its member countries and to stimulate cooperation among them so that, by attaining a healthy environment and sustainable human development, they may achieve health for all and by all.

Acerca de la OPS
La Organización Panamericana de la Salud (OPS) es un organismo internacional integrado por los Estados y territorios del continente americano. Su secretaria, la Oficina Sanitaria Panamericana, funciona simultáneamente como Oficina Regional de la Organización Mundial de la Salud (OMS) para las Américas y tiene por misión brindar apoyo técnico a sus países miembros y fomentar la cooperación entre ellos, a fin de lograr condiciones ambientales y de desarrollo humano sostenible que les permitan alcanzar la meta de salud para todos y por todos.
Trilateral Initiative against Childhood Obesity

CHILDHOOD OBESITY is an important public health problem that affects countries in the Americas. In 2014, Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) Member States agreed on a Plan of Action for the Prevention of Obesity in Children and Adolescents in an effort to address the impact of this disorder in the Americas region. The interventions laid out in this regional plan are multi-faceted and require multi-sectoral partnerships. Building on a strong history of successful trilateral collaboration, Canada, Mexico, and the United States formed a partnership to address the growing epidemic of childhood obesity in the North American region. This article and the two accompanying editorials describe the background and development process of the Initiative; specific goals, activities, and actions achieved to date; and opportunities and next steps. This information may be useful for those forming other partnerships designed to address childhood obesity or other complex public health challenges in the region.

Iniciativa trilateral contra la obesidad infantil

LA OBESIDAD INFANTIL es un problema de salud pública importante que afecta a los países de las Américas. En 2014, los Estados Miembros de la Organización Panamericana de la Salud (OPS) acordaron un Plan de acción para la prevención de la obesidad en la niñez y la adolescencia con el fin de hacer frente a las repercusiones de este trastorno en la Región de las Américas. Las intervenciones que componen este plan regional son multifacéticas y exigen la formación de alianzas multisectoriales. Aprovechando las bases sentadas por una larga tradición de colaboración trilateral, Canadá, Estados Unidos y México formaron una alianza para controlar la epidemia creciente de obesidad infantil en la subregión norteamericana. En el presente artículo y los dos editoriales acompañantes se describen los antecedentes de la Iniciativa y su creación; las metas, actividades y medidas específicas que ha habido hasta ahora; y las oportunidades y los pasos que hay que dar en lo sucesivo. Esta información podría resultar útil para quienes estén formando otras alianzas encaminadas a controlar la obesidad infantil u otros problemas de salud pública complejos en la Región.

Initiative trilatérale contre l’obésité infantile

L’OBÉSITÉ INFANTILE constitue un problème de santé publique dans les pays des Amériques. En 2014, les États Membres de l’Organisation panaméricaine de la Santé (OPS) se sont accordés sur un plan d’action pour la prévention de l’obésité chez les enfants et les adolescents dans le but de combattre les conséquences de cette condition dans la Région des Amériques. Les interventions proposées par le plan sont multidimensionnelles et reposent sur des partenariats multisectoriels. Le Canada, les États-Unis et Mexico, forts de leurs antécédents fructueux en matière de collaboration trilatérale, ont formé un partenariat pour combattre l’épidémie croissante d’obésité infantile dans la sous-région nord-américaine. Cet article et les deux éditoriaux qui l’accompagnent décrivent le contexte et le processus d’élaboration de l’initiative ainsi que les objectifs, activités et actions spécifiques accomplis en date, les perspectives et les prochaines étapes. Cette information sera utile à ceux qui formeront d’autres partenariats pour combattre l’obésité infantile ou d’autres défis complexes en matière de santé publique dans la Région.

Iniciativa trilateral contra a obesidade infantil

A OBESIDADE INFANTIL é um problema de saúde pública importante que afeta os países das Américas. Em 2014, os Estados Membros da Organização Pan-Americana da Saúde (OPAS) acordaram o Plano de Ação para a Prevenção da Obesidade na Infância e na Adolescência com o propósito de fazer frente às repercussões deste transtorno na Região das Américas. As intervenções que compõem este Plano Regional são multifacetadas e exigem a formação de alianças multisectoriais. Aproveitando os alicerces de uma histórica tradição trilateral, Canadá, Estados Unidos e México formaram uma aliança para combater a epidemia crescente da obesidade infantil na sub-região norte-americana. No presente artigo e nos dois editoriais que o acompanham, são descritos os antecedentes desta iniciativa e sua criação, metas, atividades e medidas específicas que foram empreendidas até o momento; as oportunidades e os próximos passos necessários. A expectativa é que esta informação seja útil a quem esteja formando outras alianças com o objetivo de controlar a obesidade infantil ou outros problemas complexos de saúde pública na Região.
Prevention of childhood obesity through trilateral cooperation

Francisco Becerra-Posada, Anselm Hennis and Chessa Lutter

Childhood obesity continues to increase in Mexico and the United States. Among Mexican children aged 5 to 11 years, overweight and obesity increased from 28.2% in 1999 to 36.9% in 2012 (1). In the United States, 34.2% of children aged 6 to 11 years suffer from overweight or obesity, and the percentage of those who are obese has increased from 7% in 1980 to nearly 18% in 2012 (2). However, rates of overweight and obesity among children aged 3 to 19 years in Canada declined slightly from 30.7% in 2004 to 28.7% in 2013, while the prevalence of obesity remained stable at 13% (3).

In response to the alarming epidemic of child and adolescent obesity in the Region, countries of the Americas took a major step forward when they unanimously ratified the 5-year Plan of Action for the Prevention of Obesity in Children and Adolescents (4) during the 53rd Directing Council of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO). This Plan recognizes that overweight and obesity are the direct result of high intake of calorie-dense, nutrient-poor processed and ultra-processed food—high in sugar, fats, and salt—in addition to routine intake of sugar-sweetened beverages and insufficient physical activity. It also recognizes that to confront the epidemic it is necessary to shift focus from changing individual behaviors to tackling the obesogenic environment. One example of this is the excise tax on sugar-sweetened beverages that went into effect in 2014 in Mexico, which has led to a 6% decline in sales during its first year of implementation (5).

In view of the high prevalence of child and adolescent obesity in Canada, Mexico and the United States, the new trilateral collaborative initiative to improve levels of physical activity and reduce sedentary behaviors is welcome (6). In 2012, only about one-quarter of 12- to 15-year-olds in the United States reported engaging in at least 60 minutes of daily moderate-to-vigorous physical activity (7). Among Canadian children between the ages of 5 and 17, only 13% of boys and 6% of girls were observed to achieve this level of exercise (8). In addition to helping prevent overweight and obesity, regular physical activity among children promotes physical fitness and improves aspects of academic performance (9).

This trilateral initiative seeks to build on national frameworks and action plans to address childhood obesity. Specifically, it proposes to promote intergenerational physical activity by encouraging families to be active together, as well as facilitates discussions on important aspects of the topic. The expected short-term outcome is the development of strong family-based physical activity programs. A longer-term outcome is to demonstrate successful North American joint cooperation to address childhood obesity. Regarding next steps, opportunities exist to share expertise and experiences on how to incorporate emerging evidence into surveillance systems. This could include harnessing non-traditional sources of information for surveillance such as social media and other platforms used by children and youth.

Monitoring and evaluation of the initiative with respect to changes in the level of physical activity among children will be key to better understanding the strengths and limitations of such approaches. It will also be important to share lessons learned to inspire other similar cross-country collaborations to reduce childhood obesity. As part of its efforts to support Member States counter childhood obesity, PAHO will continue to work closely with countries to promote physical activity and healthy eating through health promotion initiatives, as well as appropriate regulatory and fiscal policies.

1 Pan American Health Organization, Washington, D.C., United States of America.
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United to Reduce Childhood Obesity in North America

Sylvia Burwell, Jane Philpott and José Narro Robles

Today in North America, 1 in every 3 children under the age of 18 is overweight or obese. These children are at risk of developing chronic illnesses that will affect their lifelong health and well-being. And this, in turn, affects prosperity and economic growth. In fact, across the globe, obesity siphons off approximately $2 trillion from the world economy every year (1).

We recognize that the influences on child obesity in our countries are environmental, socio-economic and behavioral. And we know that the conditions necessary for healthy lives are not equally available to all. Some families, neighborhoods and communities cannot access affordable and nutritious foods and have fewer opportunities for regular physical activity. This is especially true in communities underserved by public transportation, fresh food outlets, recreation facilities and green spaces.

That’s why our nations are taking action. The article from our nations in this issue of the Pan American Journal of Public Health illustrates our commitment to working together so that children can grow up at healthy weights, and society can provide the supportive environments to achieve this goal. Each of our nations, individually, has set out comprehensive frameworks that cross sectors, along with goal-oriented action plans. We are implementing programs like Let’s Move! in the United States; the National Strategy for the Prevention and Control of Overweight, Obesity and Diabetes in Mexico; and Curbing Childhood Obesity: A Federal, Provincial and Territorial Framework for Action to Promote Healthy Weights in Canada. Children across North America are healthier today because of those efforts.

To paraphrase an old proverb, even though we can go fast alone, we can always go farther together. That is why our nations have pioneered the first trilateral initiative for noncommunicable diseases in North America. Our collaboration unites technical and policy experts in each of our national health departments and agencies. It promotes innovation and evaluation, sharing what we are learning, and building on successes so that programs and policies can continually improve. While trilateral initiatives to fight infectious diseases already exist, this is our first collaboration to tackle a longstanding, chronic health condition (2).

Our collaboration will grow over time. We begin our work together by focusing on active living. Routine physical activity is an essential part of overall good health. And creating and reinforcing the conditions that support active living are necessary in our countries. We can improve the way we use data, implement new, evidence-based interventions and build innovative partnerships across the public, not-for-profit and private sectors. Our commitment to help future generations live healthier lives and fight the devastating consequences of obesity marks the beginning of a productive and promising journey together.

As the World Health Organization’s Report of the Commission on Ending Childhood Obesity states, we need to strengthen the political commitment to fight childhood obesity. We need to collaborate with other government institutions, and build alliances with stakeholders beyond government to foster joint ownership and shared responsibility.

With this initiative, our countries are taking a decisive step to help reduce childhood obesity, because we recognize that the stakes of inaction are far too high for our children and the generations after them.

Our countries also have reinforced our regional commitment through the Pan American Health Organization and its 2014 Plan of Action for the Prevention of Obesity in Children and Adolescents (3).
As we come together as Member States to participate in the 55th Directing Council meeting of the Pan American Health Organization, we are pleased to announce our North American trilateral effort to lower the rate of childhood obesity. We want every boy and girl – wherever they grow up – to have a healthier life and a brighter future.

REFERENCES


Canada-United States-Mexico Trilateral Cooperation on Childhood Obesity Initiative

Cristina Rabadán-Diehl,1 Margarita Safdie,2 Rachel Rodin,3 and the Trilateral Working Group on Childhood Obesity


ABSTRACT

Childhood obesity is an important public health problem that affects countries in the Americas. In 2014, Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) Member States agreed on a Plan of Action for the Prevention of Obesity in Children and Adolescents in an effort to address the impact of this disorder in the Americas region. The interventions laid out in this regional plan are multi-faceted and require multi-sectoral partnerships. Building on a strong history of successful trilateral collaboration, Canada, Mexico, and the United States formed a partnership to address the growing epidemic of childhood obesity in the North American region. This collaborative effort, known as the Trilateral Cooperation on Childhood Obesity Initiative, is the first initiative in the region to address chronic noncommunicable diseases by bringing together technical and policy experts, with strong leadership and support from the secretaries and ministers of health. The Initiative’s goals include increasing levels of physical activity and reducing sedentary behavior through 1) increased social mobilization and citizen engagement, 2) community-based outreach, and 3) changes to the built (man-made) environment. This article describes the background and development process of the Initiative; specific goals, activities, and actions achieved to date; and opportunities and next steps. This information may be useful for those forming other partnerships designed to address childhood obesity or other complex public health challenges in the region.

Key words: Obesity; child health; Canada; Mexico; United States.

Significant advances in medicine and public health have resulted in better disease detection and treatment, decreased maternal and child mortality, improved longevity and economic growth, and better control of infectious diseases in the region of the Americas, resulting in an epidemiological shift from acute, infectious diseases to chronic noncommunicable diseases (NCDs). While infectious diseases are still a significant health problem, especially in Central and South America, NCDs now account for the highest morbidity and mortality in the region (1). Growing recognition of this transition has resulted in various health initiatives such as the 2011 United Nations Political Declaration on Noncommunicable Diseases (“the Declaration”) (2), which called for the development and implementation of effective and sustainable approaches to prevent and control NCDs. Two subsequent policy documents, the World Health Organization (WHO) Global Action Plan for the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases 2013–2020 (3) and the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) Plan of Action for the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases 2013–2019 (1), were designed and developed to help meet Declaration goals. The inclusion of NCD goals in the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda represents yet another milestone for the global NCD movement.

Despite these achievements, little change has been seen over the last decade in the prevalence of childhood obesity, an important risk factor for the development of NCDs. In Canada and the United States, more than one-third of children and adolescents are considered overweight or obese (4, 5). Mexico has among the highest rates of childhood obesity in the world, with 32% of children ages 6–12 and 35% of adolescents overweight or obese (6).

The fact that obesity affects alarming proportions of children has mobilized professional organizations, research teams, governments, and civil society...
to find effective solutions that could stop and reverse the trend. While biobehavioral research continues to explore the underlying mechanisms of obesity, the paradigms of this disorder are being expanded, as highlighted in a special series published by The Lancet in February 2015 (7) that took a broader view and focused on a systems approach to tackle this epidemic (8).

In 2014, PAHO Member States unanimously approved the Plan of Action for the Prevention of Obesity in Children and Adolescents. The plan encourages countries in the Americas to develop multidisciplinary and multi-sectoral life-course approaches to combat childhood obesity. Such approaches span fiscal policies and regulatory measures to obesity prevention and health promotion programs focusing on physical activity and healthy eating in schools and communities (9). While many countries in the region have been implementing these types of measures, there is still a need for better tools, innovative partnerships, and stronger policy interventions.

Canada, Mexico, and the United States have a strong history of trilateral cooperation, particularly on infectious diseases and public health emergencies. Successful initiatives such as the North American Plan for Animal and Pandemic Influenza (NAPAPI), which focuses on infectious diseases, have facilitated sharing of best practices, alignment and development of common approaches, and improvement of response actions during health emergencies. Extending this trilateral cooperation to NCDs leverages existing relationships as well as, in some cases, existing NCD interventions that could be applied across all three countries, and helps address transnational transmission. Like infectious diseases, noninfectious diseases can spread across borders, and transmission is affected by social norms and structures, shared values, and cultural behaviors that may exist across countries. Greater cooperation between governments can capitalize the achievements of one country to benefit others and thus maximize the impact of individual country responses to childhood obesity.

The underlying causes of childhood obesity in all three countries are relatively similar, although the underlying determinants reflect key social, economic, and cultural differences. All three countries have national-level frameworks and action plans to address childhood obesity. These include the National Strategy for the Prevention and Control of Overweight, Obesity and Diabetes (Estrategia Nacional para la Prevención y el Control del Sobrepeso, la Obesidad y la Diabetes) in Mexico (10), “Accelerating Progress in Obesity Prevention: Solving the Weight of the Nation” in the United States (11), and “Curbng Childhood Obesity: A Federal, Provincial and Territorial Framework for Action to Promote Healthy Weights” in Canada (12). The strategies are implemented using different approaches including cross-sector legislative and regulatory initiatives and policies and programs that support healthy eating and physical activity. All three national strategies address similar underlying social determinants, including physical environments of children, access to nutritious foods, consumption of sugar and fat, family empowerment, and physical activity. It is too early to provide concrete measures on the long-term impact of the strategies that have been implemented in any of the three countries.

In response to common challenges related to childhood obesity, such as sedentary behavior and unhealthy diets, and recognizing the value of partnerships and an already proven successful collaboration, the three North American countries began their trilateral initiative on childhood obesity in 2014. The Canada-US-Mexico Trilateral Cooperation on Childhood Obesity Initiative is the first platform in the region to address NCDs by bringing together technical and policy experts, with strong leadership and support from the secretaries and ministers of their national health departments and agencies. This article describes the background and development process of the Initiative; the specific goals, activities, and actions achieved to date; and opportunities moving forward.

CANADA-US-MEXICO TRILATERAL COOPERATION ON CHILDHOOD OBESITY INITIATIVE

Background and process of development

The health secretaries of Mexico and the United States and the health minister of Canada met at the World Health Assembly (WHA) in 2014 and shared their common concerns regarding the increasing prevalence of obesity in their countries. They all emphasized the need to address obesity among children, particularly in early childhood, when the epidemic can be prevented or reversed, and described their national strategies designed to achieve that goal. They agreed to collaborate trilaterally to 1) develop a platform for engagement by technical and policy experts from all three governments, 2) share in-country efforts, and 3) determine where cooperation could best benefit all three countries in the prevention and control of obesity.

In October 2014, officials from the three country health agencies (the Public Health Agency of Canada [PHAC], the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and Mexico’s Secretariat of Health [Secretaría de Salud or SALUD]) met in Washington, D.C., for the first time and agreed to a set of principles and objectives (Table 1) to guide a collaboration that would focus on childhood obesity. Subsequently, the working group (known as the Trilateral Working Group on Childhood Obesity) began meeting virtually to present their respective national plans and strategies. Relationships between technical and policy counterparts were forged, in some instances, for the first time. This allowed for more candid and in-depth discussions about opportunities and challenges experienced
TABLE 1. Principles and objectives of the Canada-US-Mexico Trilateral Cooperation on Childhood Obesity Initiative

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<tr>
<th>Principles</th>
<th>Objectives</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. As governments, we have a responsibility to lead our countries’ efforts to address the public health challenge of childhood obesity.</td>
<td>1. Facilitate the exchange of relevant information, including policies, program activities, guidelines, and regulations, with a view to informing the work of other trilateral partners.</td>
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<td>2. We recognize that complex public health issues such as childhood obesity require the engagement of all sectors of our societies to achieve effective and sustained change.</td>
<td>2. Promote the exchange of lessons learned and best practices.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Our trilateral collaboration will be visibly present, taking action in each country while drawing on the expertise, resources, and efforts of each trilateral partner State.</td>
<td>3. Encourage and facilitate individual contacts and networks between technical experts.</td>
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<td>4. Our trilateral collaboration will build on our common interest to accelerate action while valuing and respecting the different experiences and national contexts of our three countries.</td>
<td>4. Identify opportunities for adopting and implementing the promising practices and successful initiatives of other trilateral partners.</td>
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<th>Interventions</th>
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<td>1. Decreasing sedentary behavior among children and their families.</td>
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<td>2. Improving the levels of awareness, skills, and knowledge, including among parents and caregivers, regarding the importance of physical activity.</td>
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<td>3. Designing the built (man-made) environment of communities, including transportation systems, to facilitate active living.</td>
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<td>4. Designing specific initiatives to improve physical activity among vulnerable children and their families.</td>
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<td>5. Enhancing physical activity during school and in the before-and after-school period.</td>
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<td>6. Increasing access to community locations and safe, affordable opportunities for physical activity.</td>
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by each country with respect to their national approaches and future plans.

In May 2015, the group identified a series of activities to deliver on the mandate provided by health ministers. These included developing the organizational mechanisms for collaboration to facilitate sharing of research findings and the best practices and lessons learned from each country.

Goals, activities, and actions achieved to date

Exchanges among the three countries were carried out through technical meetings and teleconferences, mostly focused on learning and understanding the different national strategies, interventions, multi-sectoral approaches, and strategic partnerships under way to address childhood obesity. Countries shared success stories and highlighted a few programs, including “Let’s move!” (United States); “Chécate, Mídate y Muévete” (Mexico); and “Multisectoral Partnerships to Promote Healthy Living and Prevent Chronic Disease” (Canada). Knowledge was shared through the creation of both a technical and a policy committee, each of which had representatives from the three countries. Both of these committees continue to report on their progress regularly.

The group agreed to focus the collaboration on efforts to increase levels of physical activity and reduce sedentary behaviors by emphasizing increased social mobilization and citizen engagement, community-based outreach, and changes to the built environment. Once these activities were identified, they were discussed at two different meetings: 1) a technical workshop (the “Public Health Trilateral Cooperation Meeting”), held in Mexico City in July 2015, and 2) a technical meeting, held in Washington, D.C., in October 2015.

While the factors that drive the obesity epidemic are complex, imbalance between caloric intake and energy expenditures contributes to the disorder. Moreover, evidence-based studies indicate that physical activity can play an important role in the prevention of childhood obesity and contributes to a wide range of other positive health outcomes (13).

Therefore, once the countries agreed to focus on improvement of physical activity as a common theme, a discussion of potential interventions took place at the trilateral technical workshop in Mexico City in July 2015.

Public Health Trilateral Cooperation Meeting. The technical workshop held in Mexico City included several working groups and panel discussions. Based on the meeting output it was decided that the initial objectives of the trilateral collaboration would be 1) promoting walking and 2) enhancing opportunities for physical activity by improving access to opportunities for exercise, potentially in partnership with a common community-based organization operating in all three countries. The objective of this approach would be to provide opportunities to decrease sedentary behavior and increase physical activity among children and their family members and caregivers through an intergenerational approach. Thus, the conclusion of the technical workshop in Mexico was an agreement to work on the reduction of sedentary behavior by promoting walking and other community-based activities within the respective national contexts. The discussion in Mexico also defined supportive interventions (Table 2).
RESUMEN

Colaboración trilateral entre Canadá, Estados Unidos y México en torno a la Iniciativa contra la Obesidad Infantil

La obesidad infantil es un problema de salud pública importante que afecta a los países de las Américas. En el 2014, los Estados Miembros de la Organización Panamericana de la Salud (OPS) acordaron un Plan de acción para la prevención de la obesidad en la niñez y la adolescencia con el fin de hacer frente a las repercusiones de este trastorno en la Región de las Américas. Las intervenciones que componen este plan regional son multifacéticas y exigen la formación de alianzas multisectoriales. Aprovechando las bases sentadas por una larga tradición de colaboración trilateral, el Canadá, los Estados Unidos y México formaron una alianza para controlar la epidemia creciente de obesidad infantil en la subregión norteamericana. Esta iniciativa colaborativa, que se conoce por Iniciativa de Cooperación Trilateral contra la Obesidad Infantil, es la primera iniciativa en la Región en tratar de hacer frente al problema de las enfermedades crónicas no transmisibles convocando a un grupo de expertos técnicos y de expertos en asuntos normativos, con el liderazgo y respaldo de los secretarios y ministros de salud de los países implicados. La Iniciativa tiene por objetivos aumentar los niveles de actividad física y reducir el sedentarismo mediante a) una mayor movilización social y participación ciudadana, b) medidas de extensión comunitaria y c) modificaciones de las zonas edificadas (construidas por el hombre). En el presente artículo se describen los antecedentes de la Iniciativa y su creación; las metas, actividades y medidas específicas que ha habido hasta ahora; y las oportunidades y los pasos que hay que dar en lo sucesivo. Esta información podría resultar útil para quienes estén formando otras alianzas encaminadas a controlar la obesidad infantil u otros problemas de salud pública complejos en la Región.

Palabras clave: Obesidad; salud del niño; Canadá; México; Estados Unidos.