

Profile

Alafia Samuels: fast-food watchdog in the Caribbean

By recommending higher taxes on unhealthy foods and speaking out against a major fast food company, T Alafia Samuels has emerged as a leading figure in the fight against obesity in the Caribbean. Despite producing a disproportionately high number of the world's finest athletes—as seen most recently at the 2016 summer Olympic Games—the region also has some of the world's highest obesity rates. Samuels, who was recently appointed director of the Chronic Disease Research Centre (CDRC) at the University of the West Indies in Barbados, has a prime platform from which to appraise and tackle the issue.

Legally a US citizen but culturally Jamaican, Samuels was born in Boston, MA, USA, in 1953, to a father from Sierra Leone and a mother from Jamaica. Leaving the USA before her first birthday, she spent her early childhood in Ghana, Sierra Leone, and Canada, before moving to Jamaica, where she attended elementary school, high school, and university, graduating in medicine from the University of the West Indies, Jamaica. She later attended Johns Hopkins University (Baltimore, MD, USA) for her Master of Public Health degree (“a wonderful experience”) and returned decades later for her PhD in chronic disease epidemiology. Her research interests have focused on behavioural and clinical interventions for prevention and mitigation of diabetes and hypertension.

Samuels spent the largest portion of her career with the Jamaican Ministry of Health, providing and managing primary health-care services. An academic for 11 years, she considers herself better in that role thanks to her years spent in the “real world” and believes that all university lecturers should have at least 5 years’ experience in a non-academic setting. Before her appointment to the CDRC in December, 2015, Samuels served as senior lecturer in public health and epidemiology in the Faculty of Medical Sciences at the University of the West Indies in Cave Hill, Barbados, located in the suburbs of Bridgetown, the capital city, where she continues as the deputy dean for graduate studies and research.

While working as a practising clinician in Jamaica, Samuels soon realised that the problems she encountered related to NCDs required large-scale solutions. She wasn't being alarmist. The region now has a rate of NCD-related premature mortality double that of the USA, and diabetes-related amputations are commonplace. According to WHO's 2014 Global Status Report on Noncommunicable Diseases, the Bahamas had the highest rate of adult obesity in the Americas (36.2%), followed by the USA (at 33.7%) and the Caribbean nations of Barbados (31.3%), Trinidad and Tobago (31.1%), Antigua and Barbuda (30.9%), and Saint Kitts and Nevis (28.3%).

In recent decades, many Caribbean nations have seen great economic advance, but this development has brought

an increase in motor vehicles, which means less walking, along with an increased presence of heavily marketed fast food. The usual suspects such as KFC and Burger King are firmly established, but Samuels has taken particular issue with Chefette, the largest fast food chain in the Barbados. “Chefette brainwashes primary school children. They brand calendars, book covers, pencils, blackboards in primary schools. Children look at their logo and their fried chicken all day long. They arrange tours for the children to their locations. They sponsor sports events—as do others like Burger King, Coke, etc—but Chefette is relentless. They have been invited to meet with NCD programme stakeholders, and have not come to meet with them.”

In 2016, Samuels appeared in various Caribbean newspapers calling for taxes on sugar-sweetened beverages and fried foods such as chips. In July, the heads of government of CARICOM mandated taxes on sugar, salt, and trans fats, although this mandate is not binding and Samuels is not hopeful that all of these taxes will be implemented region-wide any time soon.

Although the heavily-marketed Chefette operates only in Barbados, different fast food enterprises have thoroughly permeated other Caribbean nations. Samuels relates how in downtown Port of Spain, Trinidad's capital city, there is a 24 h KFC that usually has a line extending out the door. She predicts that Caribbean obesity will be worse 10 years from now, because the public health community does not have the resources to compete with fast food marketing campaigns and the low-priced, calorie-dense foods so popular in supermarkets. “The only hope would be using fiscal measures to make unhealthy foods more expensive and cross-subsidising healthy foods to make them cheaper”, she explains, adding that she's not sure if the political will, administrative policies, and practices can be mobilised to actually accomplish this aim.

Outside of work, Samuel's interests include dancing and sewing—including some of her own clothes, as well as wedding dresses for friends. She also enjoys travel—a requirement of her job—and has ventured to five continents. Though she never shies away from public speaking, Samuels describes herself as “definitely introverted” and spends much of her time either alone or with close friends. Her original first name is Thelma, but she uses her middle name, Alafia, which in the Yoruba language native to West Africa means “peace has come into this household”. “However, I am not peaceful. I tend to be a disruptor”, she says—as evidenced by her attempts to disrupt the trend of obesity in the Caribbean.

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For the WHO 2014 Global Status Report on NCDs see <http://www.who.int/nmh/publications/ncd-status-report-2014/en/>