

# Pacific Heads of Health Meeting

## Réunion des directeurs de la santé du Pacifique

### Pacific Ending Childhood Obesity: Opportunities to enhance national actions

#### Summary

Childhood obesity is a serious concern as it is reaching alarming proportions in the Pacific region. Recognising this, Pacific Health leaders endorsed the establishment of the Member State-driven Pacific Ending Childhood Obesity (ECHO) Network in 2018, and committed to support ECHO priorities including physical activity, fiscal measures, and restriction of marketing of foods and non-alcoholic beverages to children.

At the inaugural Network meeting in 2019, country representatives drafted plans of action in the three priority areas. It was anticipated that countries, with support from partner agencies, would lead the Network and allocate budgetary resources to progress these collective actions, and to maintain and sustain the Network. Despite some progress, challenges remain. There are several opportunities to scale up actions.

Heads of health are invited to (i) **commit** in **strengthening and sustaining** the Network and drive the implementation of childhood obesity priorities at both regional and national level; (ii) **review** the proposed **governing and coordinating mechanism** added in the terms of reference, with a view for endorsement for further action; (iii) **commit** to allocating appropriate **budgetary resources** in their own country to support and drive plans of action in the identified priority areas; and (iv) **strengthen collaboration** with all relevant sectors including education, sports, trade and finance to implement and enforce the identified priority areas that promote healthy eating and physical activity.

## **1. BACKGROUND**

Childhood obesity is a serious concern as it is reaching alarming proportions in many countries. Recognising the health, social and economic burden of childhood obesity in the Pacific Island Countries and Territories (PICTs), Pacific Heads of Health endorsed the establishment of the Member State-driven Pacific Ending Childhood Obesity (ECHO) Network in 2018. Pacific Health Ministers and Heads of Health committed to support ECHO priorities such as physical activity promotion, fiscal measures, and restriction of marketing of foods and non-alcoholic beverages to children.

At the inaugural ECHO Network meeting in February 2019, country representatives drafted Pacific-level action plans in the three priority areas and agreed to implement these to complement individual country efforts. It was also anticipated that countries, with support from development partners, would lead the Network and allocate budgetary resources to progress these collective actions.

This paper discusses the progress, challenges, and recommendations to strengthen and sustain the functioning of the Network and opportunities to enhance national actions.

## **2. PROGRESS AND ACHIEVEMENTS**

Since the establishment of the Network, 20 of the 21 PICs included in the Network have endorsed the nomination of country focal points. Three working groups, comprising country focal points, academics and representatives from technical agencies including the Pacific Research Centre for the Prevention of Obesity and Non-Communicable Diseases at the Fiji National University (C-POND – FNU), the Pacific Islands Health Officers' Association (PIHOA), the Pacific Community (SPC), the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), have been established for the priority areas. In addition, the following institutions have been appointed and now also member the network: Deakin University as academic representative outside of PICTs, the Pacific Council of Churches as civil society organisation representative and Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat as a technical agency partner. Since its inception, country focal points agreed to implement plans for collective actions to complement individual country efforts, but progress has been slow.

**Physical activity:** Ten countries expressed interest in progressing the second component of the regional campaign development<sup>1</sup> i.e., the formative research component but only three countries (French Polynesia, New Caledonia, and Wallis & Futuna) have commenced with this. However, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has hindered progress on the development of the Pacific region-wide physical activity campaign.

**Fiscal measures:** In efforts to review fiscal measures designed to impact consumption of unhealthy food and beverages, member countries collectively agreed to the development of a sugar-sweetened beverages (SSB) toolkit to support country-level action, building on existing materials and information. Work in this area is progressing and partner agencies are organising a taxation workshop later in the year to address key issues around taxation on foods and sugary drinks that continue to be a challenge for countries.

**Restriction of marketing of foods and non-alcoholic beverages to children:** Countries acknowledged the need for a collective regulatory approach tailored to individual country needs to regulate their food marketing environments. Member countries proposed the development of a regional toolkit to assist countries in developing national marketing regulations. Work in this area has not progressed however, the Network can utilise the recently endorsed Pacific Legislative Framework for Non-Communicable Diseases to guide the development of this toolkit as the Framework already sets out legislative policies, legislation plan and draft legislative provisions to address the marketing of unhealthy foods and non-alcoholic beverages to children. With technical assistance from partner agencies, countries can also utilise the WHO recommendations on the marketing of foods and non-alcoholic beverages to children to guide their efforts in addressing this issue. To further support countries in their endeavours on this priority area, a consultative meeting and workshop is organised for September and November 2022 with 7 countries that had requested for assistance at the inaugural 2019 meeting to map out clear roadmaps on the use and/or improvement of national legal frameworks and the creation of plans that can support specific

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<sup>1</sup> The Network has collectively agreed to develop a regional campaign to promote physical activity among children aged 5-17 years old. The first phase of campaign development involved the collection of baseline information from countries through an online survey on existing physical activity programmes and/or campaigns for children in countries, as well as the key messages, key behaviours targeted and key deliverables of these programmes. The results of this survey then informed the formative research for the campaign which country focal points agreed to coordinate as the next prioritised action for the network.

regulatory mechanisms to restrict advertising of unhealthy food products and non-alcoholic beverages to children.

**Childhood obesity surveillance:** As a proposed fourth priority to map trends and assess impacts of interventions, in 2019, and to complement existing tools which support monitoring in adolescents, technical agencies have commenced discussions on developing a standardized tool that could be used for children aged 5-10 years of age.

### 3. CHALLENGES

#### 3.1 Governance and coordination

Despite commitments made by member countries at the regional level, challenges remain in maintaining and sustaining the Pacific ECHO Network. Establishing the network as a country-driven platform has not translated effectively in practice as technical agencies continue to drive the plans of action that countries have identified and collectively agreed to. While technical agencies will support the implementation of Network priorities, there is a need to strengthen the coordination of the Network to ensure that countries are at the forefront of driving initiatives that are meaningful and useful for them. To progress this, a clear ***governing and coordination mechanism*** led by country ECHO focal points from each sub-region, with one of these to be chair, and supported by technical agencies has been proposed and added in the existing Pacific ECHO Network Terms of Reference with a view for endorsement for further action (see Annex 1).

#### 3.2. Resources and multi-sectoral collaboration

At the country level, more resources are needed to accelerate the progress of prioritized actions. Foremost, ECHO focal points are overwhelmed with other competing work priorities to drive the Network and the scarcity of time and effort coupled with a lack of budgetary resources to drive plans of action continue to hinder the progress of collective actions and individual country efforts in the identified priority areas. Furthermore, civil society engagement and the education sector's engagement remains very limited, and countries continue to struggle with multi-sectoral collaboration to drive their plans of action. Carrying out prioritized actions requires a whole-of-government approach, for example, involving ministries of education to drive initiatives in schools such as promoting healthy eating and

physical activity at all levels of education, ministries of finance or revenue departments for fiscal policy areas, and enforcement units for restriction of marketing. There is insufficient attention given to driving plans of action through a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach and ECHO needs to shift to this via mobilising civil society organisations and other sectors to progress its prioritized actions. With the Pacific's commitment to Early Childhood Development (ECD)<sup>2</sup> and the establishment of the Pacific Regional Council for Early Childhood Development (PRC4ECD) in 2019, there needs to be greater collaboration and interlinkages between ECD and ECHO for a more coordinated and holistic approach to delivering for Pacific children.

#### 4. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Recognising that progress in tackling obesity in children has been slow, there are several opportunities to review, build upon and address gaps in the operationalisation of the Network to address childhood obesity. Comprehensive responses are needed to create healthy environments that can support individuals in making healthy choices. These responses require government commitment and leadership, long-term investment, and engagement of the whole of society to protect the rights of children to good health and well-being. Progress can be made if all actors remain committed to working together towards a collective goal of ending childhood obesity in the Pacific and achieving the Leaders' 2050 vision "for a resilient Pacific region of peace, harmony, security, social inclusion and prosperity that ensures all Pacific peoples can lead free, healthy and productive lives."

##### 4.1 Recommendations for governments:

Pacific Heads of Health are invited to:

- 1) **commit** in **strengthening and sustaining** the Network and drive the implementation of childhood obesity priorities at both regional and national level;
- 2) **review** the proposed **governing and coordinating mechanism** added in the terms of reference (see Annex), with a view for endorsement for further action;

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<sup>2</sup> The topic of ECD has received increased attention in Pacific countries in recent years as ECD indicators show children in the Pacific are not reaching their full potential. With the growing recognition of its importance in the future development of the Blue Pacific Continent and recognising the overwhelming evidence of the role of early years investments in transforming individual lives, communities, and entire nations, the PRC4ECD has been established to lead and drive the ECD actions in the region.

- 3) **commit** to allocating appropriate **budgetary resources** in their own country to support and drive plans of action in the identified priority areas; and
- 4) **strengthen collaboration** with all relevant sectors including education, sports, trade, and finance to implement and enforce the identified priority areas that promote healthy eating and physical activity.

#### 4.2 Recommendations for development partners:

Development partners are invited to:

- 1) **support** PICTs in the implementation and monitoring of childhood obesity priorities and plans of action;
- 2) **strengthen** efforts to improve regional coordination for the Pacific ECHO Network and the PRCC4ECD, and enhance international collaboration and networking opportunities for PICTs; and
- 3) **foster** effective collaboration with civil society organizations, governments, Network partners and stakeholders to better support implementation of childhood obesity priorities and sustain the Network.

## Annex 1

**Terms of Reference****Pacific Ending Childhood Obesity (ECHO) Network****Introduction**

The ECHO Network is a member state-driven Pacific coalition that provides a platform for collective advocacy and action on proven population based prevention measures. These measures are recommended in the ECHO Implementation plan, Pacific NCD Roadmap and Decade of Action on Nutrition towards achieving the Healthy Islands vision in the Pacific. They include, physical activity promotion, tax on sugar-sweetened beverages, front-of-pack labelling, restriction on the marketing of foods and non-alcoholic beverages to children and the provision and promotion of healthy diets in schools and other settings where children gather.

**Membership**

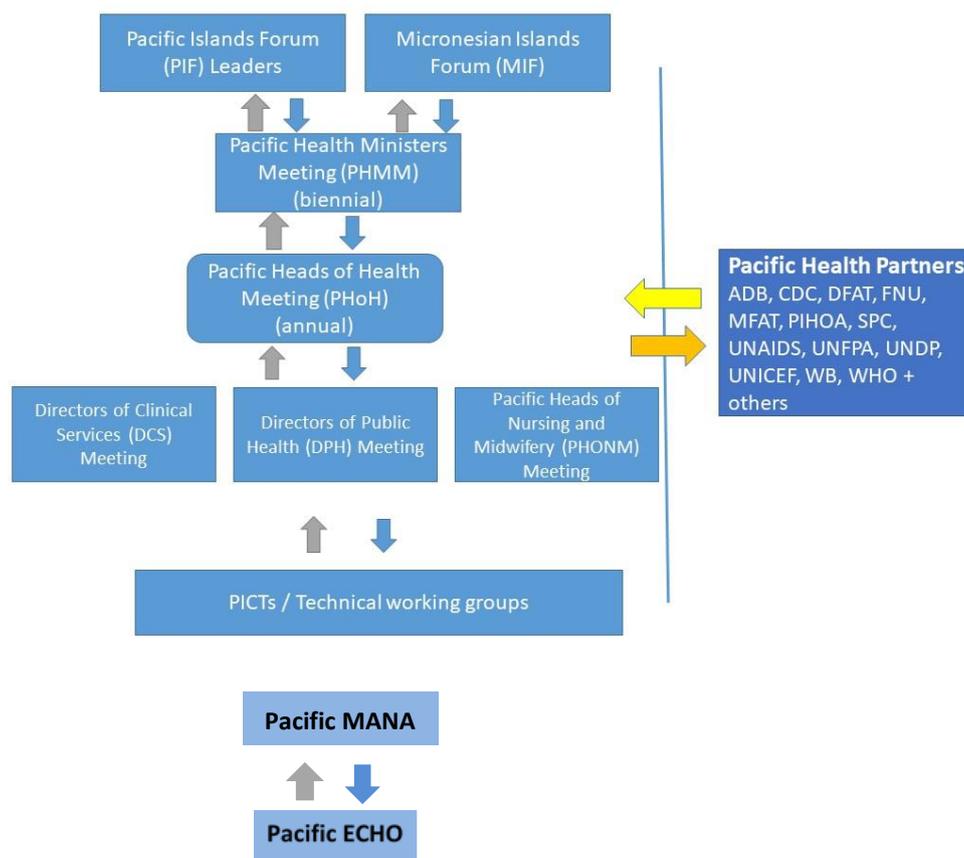
Membership will be voluntary and free to technical and implementing partners, civil society organisations and academia in the Pacific Island Countries and Territories (PICTs) involved in the efforts to prevent and manage childhood obesity. Any other interested stakeholders must be registered through the Secretariat to ensure the integrity of the Network and to manage conflicts of interest or engagement of potential members in interest groups that could bring the Network into disrepute.

**Governance and Reporting**

The Pacific ECHO Network will be governed by the Heads of Health (HoH) Sub-Committee and will report to the Directors of Public Health (DPH) Meeting, the HoH and PHMM through the Pacific Monitoring Alliance for NCD Action (MANA) Coordination Team.

The efforts to strengthen the regional health architecture have resulted in good linkages between the technical input and decision making overseen by the HoH and the political leadership by the PHMM as shown in Fig 1 below with insertion of where ECHO Network is situated.

Fig.1 Pacific Regional Health Architecture



### Operating Principles

The Pacific ECHO network will support and share best practice examples from academia, international and national context and develop collectively activities, guidance, and useful materials which may be of Pacific-wide relevance related to childhood obesity. Collective decisions are made at the HoH and the PHMM but policy decisions are made at country level through normal government processes.

- Accountability – members are accountable individually to their respective countries and organisations and collectively to the HoH and PHMM.
- Efficiency – Emphasis will be on ensuring efficient processes, with well-structured agendas for all discussions and meeting, good chairing, and early circulation of meeting papers and reports.
- To ensure a clear focus, as far as possible, discussions and meetings will be framed around the Pacific NCD Roadmap and the WHO Report on the Commission of Ending Childhood Obesity.

- Adhere to agreed aid effectiveness principles.

### **Coordination team**

A coordination team for the Network will be made up of the following:

- Four representatives from the countries – one each from Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia and Francophone countries, with one of these to be chair. The chair acts as an important link between the coordination team and network members but without necessarily preventing direct access of network members. The role of the chair is to ensure an effective relationship between the coordination team and network members. The chair and PICT representatives will act as a lead for the implementation of plans of action and will report to the network on the progress of plans of action. They are to ensure that countries are provided with practical guidance, advice and adequate support relating to the network's collective actions and individual country efforts in the identified priority areas. The countries providing the representatives will be the same countries that make up the HoH Sub-Committee. This is to ensure there is better alignment across all the governance mechanism;
- One representative from CSOs;
- Representatives from the partners (C-POND, PIHOA, SPC, UNICEF and WHO); and
- One representative from academia outside the PICTs.

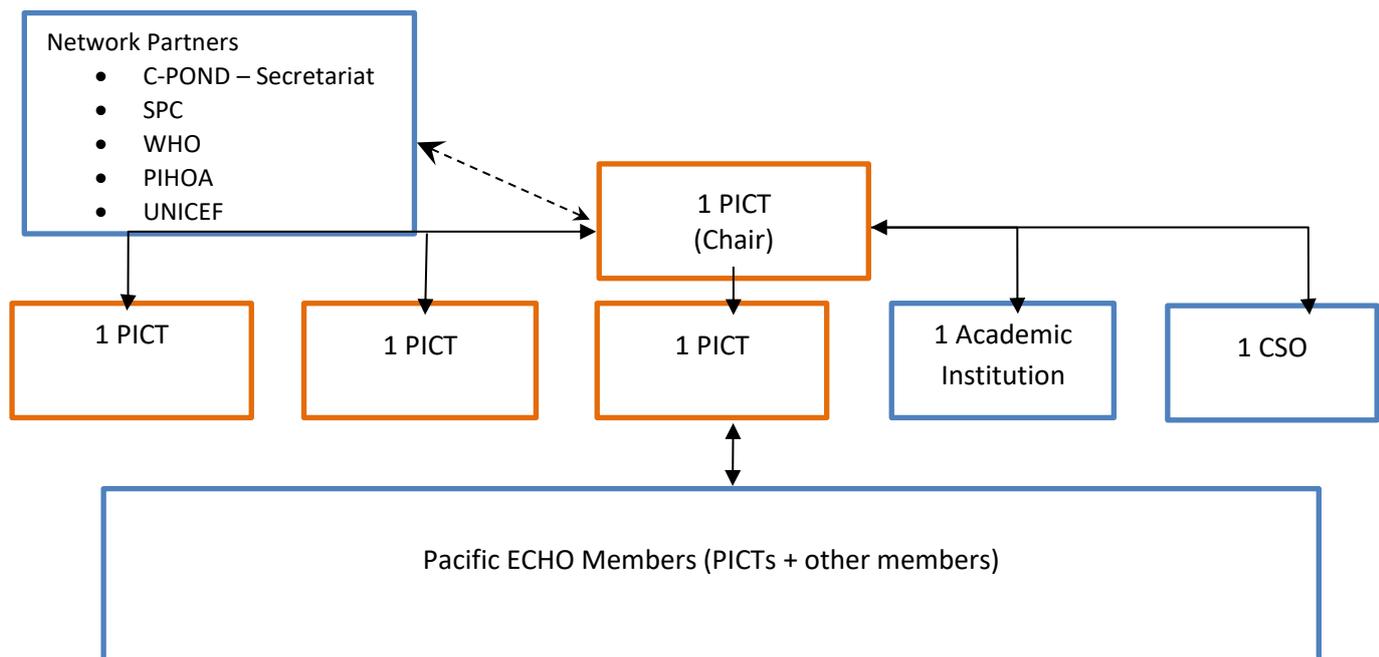
The Coordination team will carry out the necessary background work as directed by the Network and can co-opt more members as required by the specific tasks to be carried out including working groups if necessary.

The role of the Pacific ECHO Coordination Team is to ensure that the HoH and PHMM are provided with evidence based, practical guidance, advice and support relating to interventions aimed ending childhood obesity to enable them to make informed decisions. This will include the following:

- Collecting evidence on best practice on how best to address Childhood Obesity in the Pacific;
- Coordinating responses by countries, partners, CSOs and academia to childhood obesity;

- Develop and facilitating where necessary collaborations for research related to childhood obesity; and
- Developing recommendations to the HoH and PHMM.

Fig.2 Network Coordination Team



### Working groups

Working groups will be formed as needed to bring together multiple ECHO members to work on a particular issue. In the initial stages of the Network, working groups on a PIC-wide PA campaign, fiscal interventions and controlling marketing to children have been formed. Their meetings will be supported by the Network secretariat; however, the members will agree the workplan and undertake the relevant activities. They will be supported by the Coordination team.

### Secretariat arrangements

The Secretariat services for the Network will be provided by the Pacific Research Centre for the Prevention of Obesity and Non-Communicable Diseases (C-POND) with support from the Pacific Community (SPC), World Health Organisation (WHO), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the Pacific Islands Health Officers Association (PIHOA).

### Meeting Schedule

The WG will meet primarily by electronic means (e.g., Zoom) at least twice a year. Face to face meetings will depend on funding availability.

The coordination team will meet at least a quarter or more as the need arises.