

CARIBBEAN FOOD AND NUTRITION INSTITUTE AT 21

"... If the CFNI did not exist, it would have to be invented; if dismantled, it would have to be reassembled..." Such was the message delivered to the Director of the Pan American Health Organization in 1980 by an evaluation team assessing the performance of the Caribbean Food and Nutrition Institute over CFNI's first thirteen years. This year CFNI is 21 years old and no less indispensable to its 17 member countries.

What is CFNI?

In 1961, the fledgling West Indies Federation's Standing Advisory Committee on Food and Nutrition recommended the establishment of a Caribbean Food and Nutrition Institute as a means of adopting a regional approach to solving nutrition problems in the English-speaking Caribbean. Although the political entity which conceived CFNI did not survive to see its birth, the Institute was established in January 1967 as a joint undertaking of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the William-Waterman Fund, the University of the West Indies (UWI), and the governments of Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago. The Institute now serves Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, the Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, the British Virgin Islands, the Cayman Islands, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, Montserrat, Saint Lucia, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, Trinidad and Tobago, and the Turks and Caicos Islands.

CFNI functions as a specialized center of PAHO/WHO within the Food and Nutrition Program, and PAHO is its main source of funding. In addition, it has attracted the support of such United Nations agencies as UNESCO and UNICEF, international funding agencies, and corporate foundations. It has successfully tapped private sector resources in the Caribbean area for sponsorship of specific projects, and the dissemination of its message to the people of the Caribbean area has been widely supported by the communications media.

The interdisciplinary staff of CFNI includes a mix of technical specialists in health, nutrition, dietetics, agricultural economics, home economics, information, education, and communications. The core staff consists of 10 professionals and 17 general services workers in Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, and Barbados. The work of the relatively small staff is supplemented by national and international contract professionals who serve as short-term consultants and/or advisors, and national professionals who work on specific projects.

The Institute maintains a close working relationship with the University of the West Indies. Its principal offices in Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago are located on the Mona and St. Augustine campuses of UWI, which donated the land at both sites. UWI also recently extended its distance teaching facilities (UWIDITE) to CFNI, and the Insti-

tute trains university students in undergraduate, postgraduate, and certificate courses. It collaborates with the Tropical Metabolism Research Unit (TMRU) of the University Hospital, with UWI's Department of Social and Preventive Medicine, and with the Faculty of Medical Sciences, the Institute of Social and Economic Research, and the Department of Sociology.

CFNI works closely with the CARICOM Secretariat and the governments of the area. Its work is testimony to the principles that health conditions in the Caribbean transcend jurisdictional boundaries and that the slender resource base of the countries in this area obliges them to seek solutions to their common problems through sub-regional cooperation.

Objectives of CFNI

The general objective of CFNI is the promotion, establishment, and maintenance of an optimal nutritional status for the whole population of the area through collaboration with member governments in identifying, adapting, developing, implementing, and evaluating programs to achieve nutritional well-being and adequate food security. This working principle is consonant with the primary health care strategy.

The Institute supports integration of food and nutrition services delivery within the national health services structure. For this purpose, CFNI collaborates with other programs and with member governments to strengthen the nutritional component of the health services infrastructure, emphasizing systems development and training of personnel at both the subregional and national levels. It also gives technical support to national programs aimed at significantly reducing energy-protein malnutrition, specific nutrient deficiencies, and nutrition-related chronic diseases caused by dietary excesses or imbalances.

CFNI promotes and supports nutrition education and communications programs to raise the awareness, increase the skill level, and modify the practices of community workers; to encourage appropriate self-care behavior in the public; and to aid in the mobilization of resources. Educational materials on food and nutrition prepared by CFNI promote greater acceptance of locally produced foods and are disseminated through in-service training, other sectoral and intersectoral activities, and the mass media. The Institute also collaborates with national educators in incorporating food and nutrition education into the formal educational system and developing methods and materials.

A further objective is promotion and support for national multisectoral food and nutrition policies, plans, and programs, including food and nutrition surveillance. In this vein, CFNI:

- collaborates with governments in the development of multisectoral food and nutrition planning at the regional, subregional, and national levels so that more nutrition problems can be monitored, diagnosed, and resolved locally;
- collaborates with governments in measures aimed at improving food security by increasing the availability, acquisition, and consumption of food, as well as by reinforcing proper food habits, especially in vulnerable groups;
- supports the development and maintenance of an appropriate intersectoral food and nutrition surveillance system and its utilization for decision-making at various administrative levels; and
- supports the development of relevant food science and appropriate technology activities aimed at the transfer of technologies.

Priority Concerns of CFNI

Since its inception, CFNI and the governments of its member countries have been especially concerned with protein-energy malnutrition (PEM) in children. As a result of their work, and with the support of other subregional and international agencies and the Caribbean media, there has been considerable reduction of protein-energy malnutrition in the area, though it persists in a number of identifiable local communities. Paradoxically, the general improvement in the socioeconomic status of the area over the past two decades has contributed to the development of other nutrition-related health problems. With increasing life expectancy and higher living standards have come overnutrition and its attendant disorders—obesity, hypertension, and diabetes.

CFNI has responded to this shift in the pattern of nutrition-related diseases in the Caribbean within the framework of the policies of PAHO/WHO and the governments of its member countries, and its formal objectives have been constantly updated. The objectives were last modified in 1986 to come into line with PAHO's *Orientation and Program Priorities for the Quadrennium 1987–1990*,¹ which emphasizes the development of health services infrastructure, response to priority health problems, and management of knowledge.

Infrastructure development. CFNI assists governments in the area in the development of national nutrition norms, plans, and policies; trains and educates on the subject of food and nutrition in the formal education system and through informal training programs; develops research capacities of nationals; assists with design, development, implementation, monitoring, and review of systems, procedures, and standards; and produces and disseminates data on such matters as food composition and nutritional status.

¹ See *Basic Principles for Action of the Pan American Health Organization, 1987–1990*, Pan American Health Organization, Washington, D.C., 1987, pp. 3–24.

In close cooperation with the CARICOM Secretariat, the Institute works toward implementing the Caribbean Food and Nutrition Strategy, which it inspired. CFNI has also cooperated with governments in planning, executing, monitoring, and reviewing specific national projects. Through the National Food and Nutrition Coordinating Committee of Jamaica (NFNCCJ), it has participated in a "Plan of Action to Improve Household Food Availability and Nutritional Status in Jamaica," a pilot project of the Food and Nutrition Strategy.

Likewise, in collaboration with the relevant governments, the World Health Organization (WHO), and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the Institute has undertaken multisectoral pilot projects in Dominica, St. Vincent, and St. Kitts and Nevis in a Joint Nutrition Support Program (JNSP). In addition, similar collaborative efforts have been developed with the International Development Research Center of Canada (IDRC).

The activities of CFNI in these programs in Jamaica and the Eastern Caribbean have included bringing together the ministries and agencies that deal with the food and nutrition crisis; contributing to more efficient and effective action through investigation and discussion of pertinent issues; disseminating information; providing services for existing programs; researching questions; and formulating and submitting policy recommendations.

Response to priority health problems. The CFNI has ongoing projects directed against chronic noncommunicable diseases (obesity, diabetes, and hypertension); iron-deficiency anemia, especially in pregnant women and young children; and undernutrition in the under-five-year-old age group. The guiding principle is the targeting of scarce resources to those groups most at risk.

The Institute has developed educational packages for health professionals on the management of chronic diseases and has developed systems and procedures for monitoring the nutritional status of children. It has assisted individual countries with their priority nutrition-related health problems and has geared its training programs to respond to changes in the health situation in the Caribbean.

Management of knowledge. The Institute houses libraries at its Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago centers that serve as major resources for the acquisition, processing, and dissemination of information on food, nutrition, and related subjects. At its Kingston headquarters, a computer system provides data bases that guide the development of programs and store research materials, such as food composition tables listing the nutrient composition of 100-gram and one-pound portions of foods common in the Caribbean. The tables, comprising 12 main food groupings, are indexed by both common and botanical names.

A prominent feature of CFNI's work is research into nutritional behavior and standards. Recent research topics have included Jamaican street foods; migration, small agricultural holdings, and

nutrition (Saint Lucia and Jamaica); food and nutrition situational analysis (Guyana); evaluation of community nutrition programs (Barbados); assessment of iron deficiency status (Grenada); feeding practices during weaning (Grenada and St. Kitts and Nevis); and food policy, subsidies, and market prices (St. Vincent and the Grenadines and Antigua and Barbuda). CFNI also is developing a system for monitoring the nutritional status of preschool children in member countries.

All of CFNI's published materials are widely used throughout the area. Some 70% of CFNI publications are produced at the Kingston headquarters, with the remaining 30% contracted out to appropriate agencies. Institute materials are used in the formal education system as well as by the general public.

The dissemination of nutrition information is one of the most important achievements of CFNI. Its informative magazine, *Cajanus*, has been published regularly for 20 years, first bi-monthly and now quarterly. More recently, it has issued a monthly newsletter entitled "Nyam News" and has produced a series of five-minute radio programs, "With Healthy Living." The Institute has also published many pamphlets and monographs over the years.

As the result of a workshop two years ago, CFNI produced three television and 15 radio commercials for a food hygiene campaign under the slogan "Keep it clean, keep it covered, keep it cool/cold." The campaign represented a breakthrough in collaboration, with media professionals from several countries and nongovernmental organizations voluntarily assisting in the effort. Broadcasting stations throughout the Caribbean transmitted the public-service announcements on a *pro bono publico* basis.

The CFNI materials used in the school systems of the area include teachers' handbooks and guides, lesson plans, and workbooks. The Institute also assists with curriculum development. In addition, it packages materials in support of the Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC) nutrition modules in integrated science, biology, and home economics.

The Institute also produces slide shows, videotapes and audiotapes, posters, flyers and decals, and exhibits.

It is appropriate that CFNI's milestone birthday comes during the same year that WHO celebrates its fortieth anniversary. The Institute's accomplishments and leadership in food and nutrition have contributed significantly to advancing the goal of "Health for All by the Year 2000." Throughout its existence CFNI has continued to grow in stature. At age 21, it can truly be said to have come of age.

Source: Adapted from a report by Clare Forrester (Communications Specialist, CFNI), Caribbean Food and Nutrition Institute at 21, Pan American Health Organization, World Health Day 1988 Kit.