NCDs: celebrating success, moving forward

A milestone in the global response to non-communicable diseases (NCDs) was achieved in New York, USA with the adoption of the Political Declaration of the High-Level Meeting of the General Assembly of the UN on the Prevention and Control of Non-communicable Diseases.\(^1\) The level of participation by heads of state and government, and the number of interventions by countries and other stakeholders, were indicators of the interest in the issues and a measure of the success of the meeting. The Declaration recognises the enormous health and economic burdens imposed by NCDs on all countries and especially low-income and middle-income ones. It firmly positions NCDs as a development, and not just a health, issue. This is an essential reframing for the discussions in the run up to the post-Millennium Development Goals era beginning in 2015 and is to be celebrated. Although it would have been ideal for the Declaration to have included time-bound goals and targets,\(^2\) it incorporates many of the recommendations made by civil society and also stresses research and development and international cooperation, including access to medicines under the flexibilities of the trade-related aspects of intellectual property rights agreement. The Declaration opens up new opportunities to move the NCD agenda forward.

Two tasks are urgent. The first is to ensure the widest possible distribution of the Declaration. It must be known by the public, academia, media, and, especially, at all levels of government. Non-governmental organisations, led by the NCD Alliance,\(^3\) have a key role in dissemination and ensuring that NCDs remain firmly on both the health and development agendas.

The second task is to encourage the successful delivery of the four key short-term commitments agreed in the Declaration by member states and global institutions, including WHO: the development of a comprehensive global monitoring framework, including voluntary global targets and national indicators by the end of 2012; the preparation of options by the end of 2012 for an effective partnership to carry forward multisectoral actions; the strengthening of multisectoral national policies and plans for the prevention and treatment of NCDs by 2013 and their implementation; and the preparation of a report on the commitments in the Declaration as the basis of a comprehensive review by 2014.

WHO has proposed a global monitoring framework\(^4\) and a set of targets\(^5\) to monitor progress in reducing the burden of NCDs. This is a useful beginning but should be enhanced by the contributions of academia and civil society as well as member states. The monitoring framework needs to be part of a larger accountability mechanism approved by the UN Secretary-General and should include three components: global goals and national targets and indicators; an independent review of national progress towards these targets; and a mechanism for offering advice and support to countries to help them maintain progress. The Information and Accountability Commission on Women’s and Children’s Health provides an excellent model for NCDs and ideally there will be one accountability framework for all global health priorities.\(^6\) The data component of the monitoring framework should include the collection of key data attuned to the needs and capabilities of low-income and middle-income countries. The core items should relate to trends in mortality and the major shared risk factors and be integrated with the goals and targets. Time-bound, ambitious, measurable, and achievable goals and targets are essential to encourage accountability.

The proposed WHO overall goal of a 25% reduction in preventable NCD mortality by 2025 is readily achievable with a few priority cost-effective interventions.\(^7\) The major indicator should be tobacco reduction—and here we should be ambitious, aiming for an essentially tobacco-free world by 2040 with an interim target of a global adult daily smoking prevalence of less than 15% by 2025, down from the current 22%. The second major indicator should be reduction in population salt intake to the WHO-recommended level of 5 g per person per day by 2025.\(^8\) Achieving this target will have a major impact on reducing population blood pressure and would reduce the need for mass blood pressure medication, which is beyond the resources of many low-income countries.\(^9\)

There are lessons from other health partnerships that will be useful for the development of the NCD partnership.\(^10,11\) Data and evidence must be at the centre of the NCD partnership and the partnership should include all key stakeholders—civil society, UN agencies, including WHO, the World Bank, and the
private sector—with transparent rules of engagement for all partners. The goal is a partnership based on a clear action agenda; the formal structures are of secondary importance. The UN Declaration implies that the establishment of a partnership may not occur until 2013, but an operational partnership should be in place by early 2012. In addition, existing mechanisms should be strengthened to assure cooperation within the UN system itself; the active involvement of the UN Development Programme, the Food and Agriculture Organization, UNICEF, and the International Labour Organization in the multisectoral approach to NCDs is vital.

Most countries already have national policies and plans for the prevention and treatment of NCDs. Often missing, however, are the resources to implement and evaluate programmes. The development of innovative national funding schemes is critical. Lack of funding should not be an excuse for lack of action, since there are positive experiences from low-income and middle-income countries for raising funds from additional taxes on tobacco and alcohol for health promotion. In addition, countries must include NCDs in their development agendas and thus assure the cooperation of the development agencies as was promised in the Paris Declaration.

Evaluation of the progress on global and national commitments will be central to the report in 2014 to the Secretary-General. The maintenance of the momentum generated by the UN Declaration will depend in part on a streamlined, inclusive, and democratic civil society movement that is proactive, politically focused, and able to work cooperatively with global and national institutions. Sustained political momentum will keep NCDs prominent on the agendas of the major global meetings, such as the G20 and Rio+20 UN Conference on Sustainable Development in 2012; the association between NCDs and the challenges to be addressed in Rio is clear. Finally, the overarching goal is to reduce the huge health and economic burdens of NCDs, especially on the poor, by ensuring that NCDs remain central to global development. It is time for us all to move forward.

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