Message from WHO Representative to India

Noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) – mainly cardiovascular diseases, chronic respiratory diseases, cancers, diabetes and mental illness – are widely recognized as a major challenge to health, economic growth and national development.

In India, mortality due to NCDs was estimated at 5.9 million, accounting for 60% of all deaths in 2012. The NCD burden is already undermining social and economic development, which is likely to increase over the next two decades. If concerted measures are not taken, NCDs will cost India approximately US$ 3.55 trillion between 2012 and 2030, in terms of lost economic output.

While globalization, urbanization, rapid economic growth and population ageing are major drivers behind the NCD epidemic, most of the premature deaths from NCDs are linked to exposure to risk factors such as tobacco use, unhealthy diet and physical inactivity, and the harmful use of alcohol - that can be prevented by promoting healthy public policies and strengthening the health system.

The growing NCD burden also poses a challenge towards achieving the goal of Universal Health Coverage (UHC). Major inequalities are already evident across population groups in exposure to NCD risk factors, occurrence of NCDs, and in access and utilization of essential NCD services. In low and middle income countries, such as India, inadequate access and affordability of health care account for higher mortality due to NCDs among the urban poor and rural populations. Due to lack of early detection and treatment, complications from NCDs occur more often leading to high cost of treatment and out of pocket expenditure, pushing households into poverty - perpetuating the cycle of disease and impoverishment.

Owing to the diverse and multifactorial roots of the main NCD risk factors, a multi-sectoral approach would be critical for effective NCD response by government and other sectors of society. Expanding access to quality health services, both at population level as well as person services to patients who need them at affordable prices, are essential to avoiding preventable mortality from NCDs.

Recognizing the growing global burden of NCDs, The United Nations (UN) convened a high-level meeting on NCDs in New York in September 2011. Heads of State and Government adopted the Political Declaration of the High-level Meeting on Prevention and Control of NCDs, which called for “whole-of-government” and “whole-of-society”
responses, which entails influencing public policies across the government, and other stakeholders in society, including civil society, academia, media and where appropriate, the private sector. The UN Political Declaration adopted nine targets, including an ambitious global goal of achieving a 25% reduction in premature NCD mortality by 2025.

The 2011 UN Political Declaration on NCDs also called upon WHO, as the lead UN specialized agency for health, and all other UN system agencies and international financial institutions to work together in a coordinated manner to support national efforts to prevent and control NCDs and mitigate their impacts.

Subsequently, the United Nations Inter Agency Task Force (UNIATF) on Prevention and Control of NCDs was established to coordinate the activities of the relevant UN funds, programmes and specialized agencies and other intergovernmental organizations to support realization of the commitments made in the Political Declaration of the UN High Level Meeting, in particular, through implementation of the WHO Global Action Plan on NCDs 2013-2020.

A Joint Mission of the UNIATF is visiting India during 8-12 December 2014 with the aim to enhance the support of UN agencies to the Government of India to scale up the National Multisectoral Response to NCDs. The core team of the mission will comprise WHO, UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF and the World Bank, with participants from their headquarters, regional and country offices. At the country level, the mission is coordinated by the WHO Country Office for India in close collaboration with the Ministry of Health & Family Welfare and Office of the UN Resident Coordinator in India.

The UNIATF Mission will engage in a series of consultations with key stakeholders and partners from government and non-governmental organizations, civil society organizations, the private sector, as well as members of the UN Country Team (UNCT) in India to highlight lessons and identify challenges to the national multisectoral response for the prevention and control of NCDs in India, thereby making key recommendations.

Together, we shall halt the tide of NCDs and safeguard the health and economic development of the nation!

Let’s join hands for a Healthy India – a country free from the preventable burden of premature mortality due to NCDs!

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WHO Representative to India