

Towards Preventing Noncommunicable Diseases: The New WHO Global Noncommunicable Disease Network

The already heavy burden of noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) is further increasing, especially in developing countries and countries in transition. For the latter, coping with the new health threats can be particularly difficult and death rates from these diseases are high. Therefore, a major objective of the World Health Organization (WHO) 2008–2013 Action Plan for the Global Strategy for the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases is to provide support for low- and middle-income countries (LMC). This initiative was launched in May 2008. Clearly, effective management of established NCDs and, even more importantly, their prevention requires the cooperation of various players from very different areas of both, the public and private sectors. Accordingly, one of the following six objectives of the Action Plan is to strengthen international partnerships.

Six objectives of the WHO 2008–2013 Global Strategy for the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases:

- (1) *raising the priority accorded to NCDs in development work at global and national levels, and integrating prevention and control of NCDs into policies across all government departments;*
- (2) *establishing and strengthening national policies and programs;*
- (3) *reducing and preventing risk factors;*
- (4) *prioritizing research on prevention and health care;*
- (5) *strengthening partnerships, and*
- (6) *monitoring NCD trends and assessing progress made at country level.*

This was a main motive for the creation of the Global Noncommunicable Disease Network (NCDnet) in July 2009, which offers a collaboration platform for the WHO, its member states, and other international partners committed to the fight against NCDs. In this important task, the Director-General Noncommunicable Diseases and Mental Health will be advised by representatives from the WHO Regional Offices and Collaborating Centers, the World Economic Forum, the highly affected LMC, development aid agencies, academic and financial institutions, as well as inter- and non-governmental health organizations, and scientific and public health institutions, united in an international advisory council.

Overall, NCDs are underestimated as a health risk in developing countries. Indeed, according to the Center for Global Development, less than 1% of the money spent on health by international aid agencies in LMC is dedicated to the prevention and treatment of NCDs even though those account for 60% of the total disease burden. This is even more relevant as there are a number of effective, low-cost preventive measures aiming at common health risks that lead to NCDs. Raising awareness for the problem is therefore a priority of NCDnet, with the focus on the four main NCDs, cardiovascular diseases, diabetes mellitus, cancer, and chronic respiratory diseases, as well as the issues of tobacco use, unhealthy diets, physical inactivity, and harmful alcohol use as four shared modifiable risk factors.

Cooperation being crucial for the success of the network, the NCDnet Global Forum is meant to facilitate exchanges between the network members and to keep

track of the progress and also potential issues concerning the implementation of the Action Plan. The first step was taken with the launch of the NCDnet Global Forum, organized by the WHO in Geneva on February 24th, 2010. Honored by the patronage of HRH Princess Haya Al Hussein of Jordan and HRH Princess Mathilde of Belgium, the meeting gave an overview of first achievements as well as the activities planned for the future.

Considering the important role of nutrition in the prevention of NCDs, the International Union of Nutritional Sciences (IUNS) supports NCDnet as a member of the international advisory council.

In my function as President of IUNS, I am honored and pleased to offer the support of the organization to this promising project. The prospects of the first NCDnet Global Forum fuel the hopes that the particular threat imposed by NCDs on deprived nations will finally get the necessary attention.

More information can be found at:

<http://www.who.int/ncdnet/about/en/>.

Ibrahim Elmadfa
Editor-in-Chief
President of IUNS