The value of youth in the fight against NCDs

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Margaret Osolo with some of the youth delegates who joined the 2nd Global NCD Alliance Forum in Sharjah © Gilberto Lontro / NCD Alliance

Margaret Osolo Odhiambo joined the 2nd Global NCD Alliance Forum as a youth delegate. Here she shares her reflections and reinforces the immense value that youth add to the NCD movement.

Don't ignore youth – this is our future we are talking about

Youth advocates and activists, myself included, have a sense of moral outrage for the devastating impacts of non-

communicable diseases. We, representing the generation of today and tomorrow, need to be fully integrated in the decision-making platform of the NCD agenda, from the beginning until the final outcomes.

The youth population is a resourceful group to be prioritized for meaningful and inclusive engagement. Investment in and celebration of the optimism, enthusiasm, unrelenting voices and tireless efforts of youth in mainstreaming the call to action on the NCD agenda will ensure the involvement of one key group – another being persons living with NCDs – who are traditionally locked out of the many processes affecting their futures.

Many roles and opportunities

Throughout my five-day stay in Sharjah, I met and networked with many delegates from different countries, but my epic moment was drawn from the 2-day Youth Pre-Forum Meeting. This meeting brought together 21 young individuals, who tirelessly keep raising their voices and working out their role in the NCD platform.

These youth delegates, who are affected directly or indirectly by NCDs and who are actively working towards their reduction, stood out among the other delegates for their commitment to go further in fighting for and pushing the NCD agenda. Youth are a powerful tool, effective in amplifying the need to put the NCD agenda front and centre, in all global health networks, for the sake of everyone living with or at risk of NCDs.

We can be positively exploited to put a tag, a resilient voice and a brave face to NCDs in the face of ignorance and adversity amongst the key stakeholders; for example, the changing governments and industries involved in the production of commercial determinants of NCDs. Perpetuating the growth of civil societies and NCD alliances, which is key for advancing the NCD agenda, can be another important role of the youth fraternity. Bringing civil society together to share best practices is critical to advancing case studies for NCD advocacy and appropriate responses, and is another area where youth can take the lead.

In these roles and others, there is an immense need to have youth advocates and champions deliberate and focus on priorities that advance the agenda on NCDs and global health care systems.

Youth – our Call to Action on NCDs

During one of my favourite Forum sessions, a workshop on the integration of primary health care systems for women and children, what really captivated me, as an advocate for cancers – mainly childhood cancers – was the idea of banking on “health and research innovations for political capital”. A massive base of young people would be needed to advocate to bring about these innovations by rallying the support of their generation.

Another point that especially captured my attention was the call to be informed, inspired, incentivised, indignant and incensed in the NCD era. Continuous, driven dialogue and communication is essential to engage the voices of different generations, especially youth, in calling constant attention to the need to decentralise health care systems that address NCDs.

Our call to action is equally essential throughout the NCD landscape as it is in the two examples above. A key discussion point among the youth delegates was how to focus our efforts. At the beginning, I supported the idea that youth delegates should focus on access to health care and prevention of NCDs as the core priorities in our call to action – then I was met with different views from young individuals who represented diverse countries. I am grateful to those among them who suggested three specific priorities: access to health care, raising awareness, and NCD financing.

I am one, but youth are many

I am extremely proud of my representation in the forum and I am confident that the involvement of myself and other youth delegates in advocacy and speaking out was immensely successful.

I will continue to work on my commitment, as laid out in our Youth Call to Action [1], to push for better access to health care for the children in my country, especially for the most vulnerable group of kids: the street children and children hailing from poor backgrounds residing in the urban slums. I will, as well, continue pushing for prevention of NCDs, which is cheaper than treatment. Working in humanitarian and disaster/ hazardous environments, I have many entry

points for tackling the issues. The networks I created in the forum will be the building blocks for working towards my commitment, and I hope elders come good in their enthusiasm to engage with us meaningfully.

We have to carefully shift attention: a lot of the conversation around stakeholder engagement, especially about the youth fraternity, has concerned: 'How do we get them to do stuff'? To me, that is not engagement. The conversation should be: 'How can we have them on board'?

About the Author

Margaret Osolo Odhiambo (@Osolo_Odhiambo [2]), is a Kenyan humanitarian leader who developed an early interest in working for the well-being of vulnerable people in her society. Amongst other activities, she serves in the Kenya Red Cross Society- Nairobi County Youth Governance Board and volunteers in disaster management, risk-reduction programmes, and programmes aimed at building community-resilience towards NCDs. She is also involved in working with the homeless and restoring human dignity to them by provision of basic needs, healthcare and education.

Margaret is a third-year biomedical undergraduate student of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology at the Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology, with a passion for discovering a permanent solution to childhood cancers.

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