

# TACKLING NON-COMMUNICABLE DISEASES TO ENHANCE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

## A Summary for Advocates

Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs<sup>\*</sup>) are the leading causes of death worldwide and account for nearly 2/3 of all global deaths. Low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) and the poorest and most vulnerable populations are the hardest hit –but the global NCD epidemic can be significantly reduced if we take action now to address its drivers such as tobacco use, alcohol, poor diet and physical inactivity.

### **Sustainable development efforts must include health and NCDs.**

The 2011 UN Political Declaration on the Prevention and Control of NCDs acknowledges the challenge that NCDs pose, stating that the burden “*undermines social and economic development throughout the world.*”

This June, the UN Conference on Sustainable Development, (Rio+20), could agree a process for developing Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that could reshape the future development agenda. We must use this opportunity to include NCDs in the process, and establish global recognition that healthy populations and health-promoting environments are a requirement for all three pillars of sustainable development— economic growth, social equity, and environmental protection.

### **Why must NCDs be included in the sustainable development agenda?**

#### **1. Addressing NCDs is critical for economic growth and to alleviate poverty**

NCDs hamper economic growth at the global and national level by adversely affecting workers productivity and diverting resources from productive purposes to treating disease. NCDs are estimated to cause cumulative global economic losses of \$47 trillion USD by 2030, or about 75% of the 2010 global GDP.

#### **2. Reducing NCDs are a prerequisite to addressing social and economic inequity and accelerating sustainable development**

NCDs and sustainable development depend on addressing the inequities that hold people and societies in poverty and hinder economic improvements. Social determinants, such as education and income, influence vulnerability to NCDs and exposure to their modifiable risk factors. People of lower education and economic status are increasingly exposed to NCD risks and are disproportionately affected by NCDs. Addressing the social determinants of NCDs and health more broadly will augment progress towards poverty eradication and foster a more equitable society that supports sustainable development.

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<sup>\*</sup>The four major NCDs, as defined by WHO, are cancer, cardiovascular disease, chronic respiratory diseases and diabetes. Other NCDs include mental and neurological disorders such as dementia and Alzheimer’s disease; autoimmune disorders such as psoriasis; bone and joint conditions such as osteoporosis and arthritis; and renal, oral, eye and ear diseases.

### 3. Unsustainable environmental systems increase NCD risks

Unsustainable environmental systems exacerbate NCD risks and directly contribute to the growing NCD burden. Codifying the importance of health and NCDs in the SDGs will give us a lens to understand some of the human costs of poor environmental systems. For instance, an increasingly commercialized food system has led to the use of more processed foods high in fats, sugar, and salt globally—often at the expense of local food and healthier food choices. Today more people in middle-income countries are dying from causes related to being overweight or obese than from being underweight. Uncontrolled and unplanned urbanization also contributes to environmental risks. Poor air quality from emissions increases the risk of developing NCDs including cancer, heart and lung diseases.

#### Which Rio+20 priority issues can best address the NCD epidemic?

NCDs and sustainable development priorities go hand-in-hand, but three of the seven Rio+20 priority areas in particular stand out as opportunities to advance both:

##### **Nutritious food for all**

- A diverse diet and access to healthy food, including fruits and vegetables, and one that is limited in processed foods is important for preventing NCDs.
- NCD prevention will be a co-benefit of shifts in agricultural production away from commodities, such as meat, dairy, palm oil, and tobacco, toward more fruits and vegetables. This shift will reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and protect the environment.

##### **Safe and Sustainable Cities for all**

- Improved urban planning and sound transport policies support a shift from cars to walking, cycling, and public transport, which helps prevent heart disease, diabetes, some cancers, depression and dementia. Decreased dependency on motorized transport can also help prevent respiratory diseases through reductions in air pollution.

##### **Sustainable Energy for All**

- Cleaner cooking methods can help prevent illness and death from lung disease, especially among women and children. Cooking on open fires in the home is a concern for some 3 billion families across the world, causing respiratory conditions, deforestation and desertification and adding to climate change.

#### Recommendations:

- Integrate health and NCDs into existing and future sustainable development policies and frameworks, including Rio+20 Conference and follow-up
- Improve the social protection mechanisms particularly access to universal health care, that will enable people to adequately prevent and control NCDs
- Reduce exposure to the modifiable NCD risk factors through agricultural policies that ensure food security and prevent land degradation, urban planning and transport policies that promote healthy and active cities, and policies that reduce pollution and support access to clean energy.

For references please see the NCD Alliance policy briefing available at [here](#)