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Agencies push for inclusion of non-communicable diseases in global health agenda

By Ryan Dicoivsky



WHO and CARICOM leaders are suggesting a push against risk factors like tobacco as part of a proposed international commitment to fight the spread of non-communicable diseases. (Photo credit: Flickr user babasteve/Creative Commons.)

11 February 2010 [MediaGlobal]: When the international community adopted the Millennium Development Goals in 2000, the chief health focus was on diseases that affect young children and women. The goals, commonly known as the MDGs, sought to eradicate poverty and halt the spread of deadly communicable diseases such as HIV/AIDS and malaria. Despite the momentous dedication of the international community to the MDGs, a wide array of non-communicable diseases was completely left out of the new development agenda.

In response to the increasing prevalence of non-communicable diseases, such as heart disease, cancer, stroke, and diabetes, international organizations are beginning to call for changes to the global health paradigm. The Caribbean Community of states (CARICOM) and the World Health Organization (WHO) have announced their intention to introduce a United Nations General Assembly resolution that would encourage United Nations agencies to work together to eliminate non-communicable diseases, which are responsible for 60 percent of all global deaths.

At a press conference on the topic on 5 February, the Assistant Director-General of the World Health Organization, Dr. Ala Alwan, told **MediaGlobal**: "About 40 percent of deaths due to non-communicable diseases are premature deaths. The non-communicable disease epidemic, which is increasing in all parts of the world, including developing countries, is also having a negative impact on social economic development."

Alwan was joined by experts and politicians at the conference who all agreed that non-communicable diseases should be a priority for international leaders. Dr. Donatus St. Aimee, Permanent Representative of the Mission of Saint Lucia (a member of CARICOM) explained to **MediaGlobal**, "I think what we're hoping to get by the [General Assembly] resolution is the coming together of all those [UN] programs... they are all interrelated." In addition to calling for UN recognition of non-communicable diseases as a grave problem, the resolution is asking that world leaders include the topic in their talks at the United Nations summit on MDGs next September.

Caribbean states are well-positioned to make their case for highlighting the perils of non-communicable diseases. Dr. Alafia Samuels, an epidemiologist at the University of the West Indies, told **MediaGlobal**: "The Caribbean has the highest burden of disease from chronic diseases in the region of the Americas. For example, the mortality rate from diabetes in Trinidad and Tobago is 700 percent of what it is in Canada." Samuels argued that in light of the terrible health conditions of Caribbean people, governments must take a multi-faceted approach to health policy.

Samuels added: "This is not a matter for the Ministry of Health. This is a matter for the Ministry of Trade, the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Local Governments. All of these sectors have their parts to play [in] making the right choice the easy choice, in making healthy food choices available, in making safe exercise places available, in passing taxes and fiscal measures to reduce tobacco consumption, [and] to address the unsafe use of alcohol."

Samuels said the heart of the problem in the rise non-communicable diseases is societal factors. All four panelists agreed that non-communicable diseases are at least partly the result of lifestyle choices like drinking alcohol and smoking. Nonetheless, the panelists also argued that there ways to prevent such lifestyle trends, including the involvement of multiple government agencies.

For example, the use of tobacco could potentially be curbed by the right government regulations and dedication. Dr. Deborah Malta, coordinator of the Department of Non Communicable Diseases at the Brazilian Ministry of Health, told **MediaGlobal** that the use of tobacco in her country has jumped 11 percent since 1996, so that half of Brazil's population now smokes. She blamed advertising as the culprit, and said, "Lifestyle is part of the explanation of the disease but you need the policies, we need the legislation, we need the support of the other sectors."

Alwan pointed out that leaders should recognize the critical nature of non-communicable diseases, regardless of the fact they are not in the MDG agenda. He said that because those diseases are not on the official list, "Donors and development agencies are not considering prevention of non-communicable diseases as a priority. So developing countries that require technical assistance and support in addressing this huge burden are not receiving the kind of support that they very much need."

At this stage, simply forcing the UN to acknowledge and cohesively address non-communicable diseases will be a challenge. St. Aimee listed multiple examples of individual UN-affiliated agencies that address the challenges of afflictions such as diabetes and stroke. Still, he was of the opinion that those efforts were the equivalent of taking two steps forward and one step back. He said that a cohesive agenda would be more efficient, and lamented, "in many respects we are competing for the same resources."

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