

# Commonwealth Secretariat

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Commonwealth Health Ministers Meeting  
Geneva, Switzerland, 15 May 2011

Theme: '*Non-Communicable Diseases – A Priority for the Commonwealth*'

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Agenda Item V

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## PROGRESS REPORT: COMMONWEALTH SECRETARIAT ROAD MAP ON NON-COMMUNICABLE DISEASES

Paper prepared by  
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### BACKGROUND

Many Commonwealth countries have an increasing burden of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and their determinants. These diseases are mainly cancers, cardiovascular diseases, chronic respiratory disease and diabetes, and are increasing largely as a result of a rise in four associated major risk factors of tobacco use, physical inactivity, harmful use of alcohol and an unhealthy diet. The global burden of these diseases is significant and threatens the ability of countries to achieve sustainable development.

2. In response to this emerging health crisis, the Commonwealth Heads of Government, at their meeting in Trinidad and Tobago in 2009, issued a Statement on "Commonwealth Action to Combat Non-Communicable Diseases". The Statement affirmed their commitment to address the burden of these diseases and to strengthen the ability of their countries to respond effectively. Heads of Government pledged to work towards:

- Fully integrating NCD prevention and control into national health programmes and plans through comprehensive and integrated preventive and control strategies at the individual, family, community, national and regional levels and through collaborative partnerships with the private sector, NGOs and other social, regional and international partners;
- Monitoring NCDs and their risk factors in existing national health information systems;
- Reducing the incidence of NCDs by fostering multi-sectoral policies and community-based initiatives to discourage tobacco use and unhealthy diets and to promote physical activity.

3. It is notable that the Heads of Government also called for a Summit on NCDs to be held in September 2011, under the auspices of the United Nations General Assembly, in order to develop strategic responses to these diseases and their repercussions.

4. Wishing to operationalise this high-level statement, the Commonwealth Secretariat developed a Road Map on NCDs which identified a set of objectives and activities to catalyse change in this field of health. The Road Map was accepted by Commonwealth Health Ministers at their annual meeting in May 2010. Working under the mandate of the Ministers of Health, the Health Section of the Social Transformation Programmes Division continues to work to achieve the objectives within this document. Progress made between May 2010 and April 2011 is outlined below.

5. **OBJECTIVE 1: Raising the priority accorded to NCDs in development work at global and national levels**

- (a) Working with countries in building and disseminating information about the special relationship between NCDs, poverty and development; and
- (b) Calling on global development initiatives and related investment decisions to take into account the prevention and control of NCDs.

6. In recognising the threat that NCDs pose to countries achieving sustainable development, the Secretariat has worked to both raise awareness of these diseases and the priority given in response to NCDs.

7. The Secretariat hosted a Commonwealth Consultative Meeting on NCDs in November 2010. The meeting's objectives were fourfold:

- I. To share experiences (both challenges and successes) of responding to NCDs at a national and international level.
- II. To discuss the way forward for countries to proceed in prioritising their response to the burden of NCDs and associated risk factors.
- III. To discuss how the Commonwealth Secretariat can further support member countries and associated organisations in responding to NCDs.
- IV. To discuss preparations for both the CHMM in May 2011 and the United Nations High-Level Meeting on NCDs in New York in September 2011.

8. The Consultative Meeting was attended by representatives from the ministries of health of five Commonwealth countries – Lesotho, Malaysia, Maldives, Trinidad and Tobago, and the United Kingdom – and from the Caribbean Community Secretariat (CARICOM). Additionally, Jamaica's High Commissioner to the UK was present, as well as representatives from leading civil society organisations including Commonwealth organisations. Input from these representatives from across Commonwealth countries and organisations provided an opportunity for rich discussion into the global NCD movement and for the Commonwealth to consider how it can effectively apply the resources at its disposal to support the cause of NCDs and work to ensuring that Commonwealth perspectives are captured at the UN High-Level Meeting. Key outcomes, in the form of actions for the Secretariat, included; accelerated preparation for the Commonwealth Health Ministers Meeting (May 2011), exploring mechanisms in

advocacy for youth relating to NCDs, and to seek opportunities and modalities for further work with the NCD Alliance. The report of this meeting is available online through the Secretariat website.

9. Acknowledging the comparative advantage of the Secretariat's headquarters in London, an NCD briefing for High Commissioners was held in February 2011. The aim of the meeting was to increase knowledge of NCDs and the Commonwealth's work in this area amongst High Commissioners. Twenty-three High Commissions were represented at the meeting, eight of these represented by their High Commissioners. All Commonwealth regions were represented. Addresses and discussions contributed to an improved understanding and awareness of action by High Commissions, together with a commitment to advocate for active participation of Heads of Government at the UN High-Level Meeting on NCDs in September 2011.

10. Aware that knowledge of NCDs and their determinants remains relatively low within many populations, and furthermore, that knowledge and interest of journalists is also weak, the Secretariat has developed a Commonwealth NCD Media Strategy. This has been undertaken by the Secretariat's Communications and Public Affairs Division, in collaboration with the Health Section, aiming to increase understanding of NCDs at population level and to increase reporting on NCD issues by journalists across the Commonwealth. The Strategy proposes to host a series of regional NCD media workshops in collaboration with WHO regional offices. These proposed workshops will be open to national and regional health journalists and Commonwealth media associations.

11. To complement this work, the Secretariat has commissioned a series of short films relating to NCDs and youth. The series of films carry strong messages, based upon case studies of young people from across the Commonwealth, and expert interviews where appropriate. The footage will be edited and grouped to target the specific audiences of youth, Commonwealth citizens (to be made available to journalists through the media workshops) and importantly, to policy makers at national and international forums. The main aims of the films, in accordance with the objectives of the NCD Road Map, are to raise the priority accorded to NCDs, promote the establishment and strengthening of national policies and plans for prevention and control of NCDs and to promote interventions to reduce the four main modifiable risk factors by sharing experiences.

12. **OBJECTIVE 2:** To promote the establishment and strengthening of national policies and plans for the prevention and control of NCDs by

- (a) Identifying and disseminating best practices and successful approaches for intersectoral action against NCDs; and
- (b) Mobilising technical support to build national capacities in reducing the levels of exposure of individuals and populations to risk factors, strengthening health care for people with NCDs, and mapping and monitoring the NCD epidemic.

13. In line with one of the six objectives of the WHO 2008-2013 Action Plan on NCDs, the Secretariat continues to explore ways in assisting member countries to strengthen their NCD policies and plans.

14. Member countries and regions vary in their stage of response to this health crisis. Therefore, it was considered important to disseminate examples of good practice within member countries and communities to inspire action and galvanise enthusiasm for responding to these diseases. The Secretariat has commissioned a publication of case studies in this regard. The Secretariat publication “*Taking up the challenge of NCDs in the Commonwealth: 17 good-practice case studies*” was launched on 15 May 2011 at the Commonwealth Health Ministers Meeting and is available online through the Secretariat’s website. The aim of the publication is to share examples between countries in responding to the rising burden of NCDs, to inspire similar initiatives and advocate for an accelerated response throughout the Commonwealth.

15. The Secretariat funded a representative from the East, Central and Southern African Health Community (ECSA-HS) to attend the 4<sup>th</sup> WHO-IUMSP International Seminar on the Public Health Aspects of NCDs (7-12 March 2011). The aim of the seminar, focussed upon low- and middle-income countries, was to provide an overview of the epidemiology of NCDs and the public health approaches for the prevention and control of these diseases.

16. OBJECTIVE 3: To promote interventions to reduce the four main shared modifiable risk factors for NCDs by exchanging experiences and mobilising north-south and south-south support to strengthen the implementation of intervention projects.

17. In response to the request to mobilise technical support in this field of health, the Secretariat has forged links with the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission. The Commission has agreed to place a focus upon applications for Professional Fellowships relating to NCDs during 2011. These Fellowships facilitate UK organisations to host a professional from a developing Commonwealth country for a period of between one to six months. These are designed to enhance skills which Fellows then take back and apply in their developing country of origin to build capacity in this important area of health.

18. OBJECTIVE 4: To promote research for the prevention and control of NCDs by calling on the research community to prioritise, implement and fund research projects included in WHO’s “Prioritized NCD Research Agenda”.

19. Recognising the need for a strengthened evidence base for response to NCDs, the Lancet has published three series of papers relating to “chronic diseases and development” in 2005, 2007 and 2010. The Secretariat was pleased to support the Lancet in hosting the launch event of the third series of papers relating to chronic diseases in November 2010, London. Furthermore, the Secretariat funded national representatives from five Commonwealth countries (Lesotho, Malaysia, Maldives, Mauritius and South Africa) to attend this launch event which coincided with the Secretariat’s Consultation on NCDs.

20. Subsequently, the Secretariat was invited to be a member of the Lancet NCD Action Group and contributed to the authorship of the paper “*Priority actions for the non-communicable disease crisis*” which proposes five overarching priority actions for the response to the global burden of NCDs. These are leadership, prevention, treatment, international cooperation, and monitoring and accountability. The paper also highlights five priority interventions; tobacco control, salt reduction, improved diets and physical

activity, reduction in hazardous alcohol intake, and essential drugs and technologies. These interventions were chosen because of their health effects, cost-effectiveness, low costs of implementation, and political and financial feasibility. The paper was published in the Lancet on 23 April 2011, and was launched the First Global Ministerial Conference on Healthy Lifestyles and NCD Control (Moscow, 28-29 April 2011).

21. **OBJECTIVE 5:** To promote partnerships for the prevention and control of NCDs by collaborating closely with NCDnet.

22. The World Health Organisation's NCDnet seeks to provide support to low- and middle- income countries to implement the WHO Action Plan for NCDs by fostering partnerships across sectors including civil society and the private sector.

23. The Secretariat has met with the leaders of the WHO NCDnet and is now a member of their forum. The Secretariat's Communications Officer has been liaising with the group, identifying opportunities to partner and to share information.

24. **OBJECTIVE 6:** To evaluate progress at national and Commonwealth levels by assessing national capacities and monitoring trends of NCDs and their determinants.

25. Many Commonwealth countries lack capacity to effectively monitor trends of NCDs and their determinants. Surveillance is essential for countries to fully understand, effectively respond and also evaluate the impact of implemented control measures in this field. NCD surveillance should be integrated into existing national systems.

26. The World Health Organisation has taken the lead role in assessing countries capacity to respond to NCDs, conducting surveys in 2000 and 2010, in assisting countries monitor the trend of diseases and their determinants (WHO Global InfoBase) and also implementing the global school-based student health survey. Furthermore, the WHO has recently published the first global status report on NCDs with data from 2010.

27. To avoid duplication, and in recognition of the expertise and resources of the WHO in this field, the Secretariat was grateful to receive WHO surveillance data of NCD determinants, for publication in the annual Commonwealth Health Ministers' Update.

28. The Secretariat is aware that many member countries still require both financial and technical assistance to develop or strengthen national surveillance of NCDs and their determinants. Therefore, the Secretariat will prioritise its attention upon this area for the coming year, in consultation and collaboration with the WHO.

### Looking Ahead

29. The Secretariat will continue to work in collaboration with Ministries of Health and partner organisations to improve awareness of NCDs at all levels of society and across sectors. Furthermore, the Secretariat acknowledges that there is a need to now focus efforts upon assisting countries to improve national surveillance of NCDs and their determinants.

30. The Secretariat will encourage participation by Commonwealth countries, at the highest level, at the forthcoming UN High-Level Meeting on NCDs, and will explore opportunities to share Commonwealth perspectives through a side event in collaboration with partners. It is acknowledged that focus and resources are maintained beyond the UN High-Level Meeting in September 2011, to ensure that attention remains focussed and commitments are held.

31. As the Road Map document acknowledged in 2010, in order to achieve these ambitious goals, the Secretariat requires sustained resources to effectively implement proposed assistance in this important field of health.

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