

UNITED NATIONS



NATIONS UNIES

ECOSOC Annual Ministerial Review  
Regional Ministerial Meeting for Western Asia on  
“Addressing Noncommunicable Diseases and Injuries: Major Challenges to  
Sustainable Development in the 21<sup>st</sup> century”

Statement by  
Mr. Thomas Stelzer, Assistant Secretary–General, UNDESA  
Doha, 10 May 2009

Honourable Ministers,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations, I would like to join the President of ECOSOC in congratulating the Government of Qatar for hosting this important meeting in preparation of the Council’s 2009 Annual Ministerial Review in July in Geneva.

I am honoured to address this august gathering.

We meet at a critical time. Since the 2000 Millennium Summit, countries have made significant strides towards the achievement of an ambitious global development agenda set to eradicate poverty, combat disease and improve the health and well being of millions of people.

Now, the most severe financial crisis and economic downturn since the Great Depression of 1929 has shaken the foundations of the international financial and economic system. It is putting much of the hard-earned progress in developing countries at risk and may jeopardize future advancement.

We have to ensure that the gains made in achieving the MDGs are not only sustained but enhanced. When it comes to the realization of MDGs, the health related goals hold key to the overall progress.

For this reason, the United Nations Secretary-General has made a priority of promoting global public health. Health is a foundation for prosperity, stability and human development. He has also warned us that in the face of the current crisis, we must maintain investments in public health, particularly to protect the most vulnerable.

Today's discussion on "addressing noncommunicable diseases" is thus timely and key to the success of our efforts towards global health and prosperity.

Indeed, we are witnessing that the conditions that kill and disable most people in developing countries have fundamentally changed over the past three decades. Noncommunicable diseases such as cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, cancer and chronic respiratory diseases account for 60 per cent of deaths globally. When taken together with injuries, these are responsible for about 70 per cent of all deaths. Eighty per cent of these occur in low- and middle-income countries.

Globally, cardiovascular diseases alone are responsible for more premature deaths than HIV/AIDS, malaria, and tuberculosis combined. These have a particularly high toll in Western Asia, where they account for 27 per cent of all deaths.

Noncommunicable diseases and their risk factors are both closely linked to chronic poverty and contribute to poverty. They also disproportionately affect the poor and disadvantaged in low- and middle-income countries. Recent research suggests that maternal malnutrition or low birth weight may program a child to be more prone to adulthood obesity. As a result, underweight children and overweight adults are now often found in the same households. The recent crisis and soaring food prices is set to exacerbate this trend, by forcing many households to turn to less expensive foods, which are typically high in fat and sugar and low in essential nutrients.

If these challenges are not addressed, the World Health Organization forecasts that 25 million people will die from noncommunicable diseases in the Western Asia region between 2006 and 2015.

The magnitude and growth of the four major noncommunicable diseases - cardiovascular diseases, cancer, diabetes and chronic respiratory diseases – is set to derail our efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals. Yet, these are not captured in the targets and indicators of the MDGs,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The good news is that workable solutions are within reach. Noncommunicable diseases and injuries are largely preventable by modifying their risk factors. This demands improving eating habits, increasing physical activity and curbing the use of tobacco and alcohol.

We can significantly reduce the number of premature deaths through cost-effective policy initiatives and community-based interventions focused on diminishing these risk factors. Among the most cost-effective are tobacco taxes, salt reduction, and support for lifestyle changes.

We have also noted that it is critical to strengthen health systems to address the needs of people who are already facing noncommunicable diseases and injuries. In many low- and middle-income countries essential medicines for treating these diseases are often either not available or not affordable. This highlights the importance of prevention and early detection. There are also cost-effective primary care solutions, such as blood pressure treatment, good management of diabetes, secondary prevention of cardiovascular diseases and making essential drugs available. Ultimately, it is vital to integrate the care of noncommunicable diseases in primary care.

If there is one lesson that we have learned, it is that to be effective, the prevention and treatment of noncommunicable diseases must be mainstreamed into national development programmes and involve ministries and stakeholders beyond the health sector. Government leaders can be more proactive both in fostering more cross-sector collaboration within government and in reaching out to work more closely with civil society, academia, the private sectors.

I would like to propose that this meeting may consider making a recommendation for the establishment of a multi-sectoral ministerial task force on NCDs. WHO could be requested to further explore this idea.

In conclusion, let me once again stress the importance of incorporating noncommunicable diseases into the global development agenda. The World Health Assembly recently endorsed the *Global Noncommunicable Disease Action Plan* that calls upon Member States and international partners to strengthen their actions to address these diseases. We can use this as a building block for our efforts.

This meeting provides an important opportunity to work together and come up with concrete recommendations to take head on the challenges we face. I look forward to hearing your ideas on these issues and to stimulating discussions over these coming two days, which will enrich the work of ECOSOC.

Thank you.

\* \* \* \* \*