

## Taking Action Finally – Responding to the NCD Crisis

1. [Slide #1]: Mr. Secretary General of the Commonwealth, Ministers, Colleagues, and friends, I today talk about the NCDs, with greater optimism than I have ever been able to do before. I must confess it is guarded optimism, but mixed with excitement about the possibilities before us for the prevention and control of the NCDs.
2. [Slide #2]: I am privileged to be presenting this short paper on NCDs today to my colleagues from the Commonwealth. I speak to you with the backdrop of the breaking news that the UN last Thursday passed a resolution giving the prominence to NCDs we have fought for during the last decade.

I have spent a decade, joining many others, many in this room, and many within the Commonwealth, calling for action in response to what we saw as a global pandemic of NCDs, a severe barrier to poverty reduction and, indeed, what the evidence portrayed - a significant contributor to new poverty.

Too many of us for years suffered disappointment that either no one was paying attention or that if anyone were paying attention, the world was not yet prepared to respond in a manner appropriate to the crisis. A crisis was right in front of us and we responded with nonchalance and neglect. We share a collective guilt for this neglect.

But I believe, as we gather here today for the Commonwealth Ministers of Health Meeting, there is reason for optimism. We are taking action finally! We are no longer prepared to neglect a major challenge to development. Clearly, the world today can say we have acknowledged the seriousness of what we face. Testimony to this is the fresh news that the UN last Thursday adopted a resolution establishing a clear mandate to deal with the NCDs through global solidarity. Let me congratulate the Ministers and our colleagues from CARICOM and the Caribbean and the Commonwealth and thank the WHO for the marvelous advocacy that has led to this success, but it is only one small step forward. The passage of the resolution raises hope, but it is not a reason for celebration.

3. [Slide #3]: Make no mistake, we the world face a pandemic of enormous proportion. None of us, whether we live in developing countries, or developed countries, are safely behind protective walls. This is not dependent on where we live, rich countries and poor countries, communities everywhere. Not a family seems to be spared by the lava-like movement of the NCDs. Our peoples are being impacted by the growing scope and the increasing ferocity of the NCD epidemics everywhere. We call the crisis justifiably by natural disaster terms now. Thus, the NCD crisis is referred to as a tsunami by some.
4. [Slide #4]: Whether we live in the assurance of wealthy nations or the agony of poverty in poorer nations, we all are paying the price for the collective sloth in acknowledgement of the long-standing NCD Crisis. The NCD tragedy finds us looking at numbers such as an average of 38M deaths due to

NCDs out of an estimated 58M total deaths per year around the globe. Our peoples pay with lost lives and increasing disability, and the attendant rise in poverty. The NCDs are eating away at the gains we have made in the fight against poverty. They are eating away the gains we have made in reducing premature deaths. They are eating away the gains we have made in live expectancies. We are all being consumed. My Region of the Caribbean has seen significant increases in the prevalence of the NCDs and four of these diseases account for greater than 60% of all deaths in our Region. In some countries like Trinidad and Tobago, prevalence of diabetes is around 15%. Hypertension in age group 25 to 64 years old is about 25% in many countries of the Caribbean. The prevalence of heart diseases in the Caribbean doubles that in the USA.

5. [Slide #5]: It is not just the deaths and disability that make the NCDs such a great global tragedy. It is the unaffordable cost that the NCDs foist on a hapless population and on countries. Clearly from the evidence at hand, NCDs impose severe costs on national health care systems and economies as a whole. More studies are required, but already and for some time now, we have a reasonably good understanding of the enormous economic and development cost of the increasing challenge from NCDs that tells us the NCDs are not merely public health issues – they are for certain a major developmental issue, a major risk as a world begin to address accelerated development in a more equitable manner, with no country left behind. Our ambition for a world in which citizens enjoy long, healthy and disability-free lives is being destroyed by the onslaught of the NCDs. In spite of this, outside of some noise from some quarters, the world has been largely silent about the crisis caused by the NCDs.
6. [Slide #6]: We need an emergency response. We need to make a difference. The answer must be solidarity in the fight against the NCDs, now! We have proven to ourselves within the Commonwealth and Globally that solidarity works. The MDG Declaration, as an action in solidarity, has led to considerable progress against poverty and against the tragedy of maternal and child deaths. We have made tremendous progress against HIV, TB and Malaria through the MDGs and the GF. Through GAVI, we have ensured that millions more of children are being protected against serious vaccine-preventable diseases.

Even though several countries are considerably behind the targets established for the MDGs, we have made significant progress globally in tackling the issues identified in the MDGs. The MDG has proven to be a worthy tool.

These tools have provided the global collective action necessary to confront development and health emergencies.

We need a similar response for the NCDs. True for too long the NCDs remained in our psyche as a silent pandemic. The lack of fanfare for the NCDs led us to ignore the crisis. Over the last decade, the resolve to respond to the growing acknowledgement of NCDs as a crisis has shown greater intensity. But as the MDGs Declaration has shown, and as GAVI and the GF and the 3X5 and the FCTC have shown, we need a global tool to hold countries accountable. Whether we act now as

countries or as a world is not an option. The NCD-driven deaths and disability and its imposition of poverty leaves us but with an imperative. Act now or expose yourself to a faith of deaths and disability.

7. [Slide #7]: For several decades the world stared at the NCDs and did nothing, nothing much. But this does not mean that those who recognized the dangers and warning signs were not trying. There is a long list of the achievements linked to the efforts of several persons and groups to bring the NCDs to the attention of the world. I draw your attention to several milestones in the efforts to highlight the grave dangers that the NCDs posed to our welfare and to development as a whole.

Indeed, our ambition of a world responding effectively to the NCD crisis appears more likely today than it did last week this time. The initiatives and advocacy over the last decade have set the stage for a global agreement on NCDs. The UN Resolution passed last Thursday has come about because of concerted advocacy and action by many over the last decade as exemplified by the examples on the screen before us all right now.

8. [Slide #8]: Now we have the opportunity to transform these separate acknowledgements into a concrete comprehensive global response, as a treaty or a development tool to which we agree globally to be accountable. The WHO and its regional bodies have been providing encouraging leadership in the last decade for this transformation. I acknowledge the work of the WHO's Dr. Alwan. But I also must acknowledge the work of the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth Ministers of Health in 2007 dedicated its meeting to the NCDs and established the basis for the Statement issued by the Heads of Government at their meeting in 2009 in Trinidad. The Commonwealth must continue to be active and must establish the fight against the NCDs as one of the pillars upon which its continued strength as a body is built. Its action in 2009 has placed the Commonwealth well placed to play a leadership role in the prevention and control of the NCDs.
9. [Slide #9]: The Port of Spain Declaration on the NCDs today stand as a pivotal milestone in the fight against the NCDs. My own country, Guyana, is a country within CARICOM. CARICOM is proud of our leadership in the fight against NCDs. CARICOM broke the shameful silence a long time ago. In 2001, the Heads of States of CARICOM started its long-standing interest in the fight against NCDs through its Nassau Declaration and the establishment of its revised Caribbean Charter on Health. The Caribbean Charter on Health III is about to be published and the Caribbean's intent to take intensified action against the NCDs is enshrined in the CCHIII. We further have shown our determination to fight against the NCDs when we agreed as Nations to merge the various Regional Health Institutions into the Caribbean Public Health Agency and tasked it to implement a comprehensive strategy for the prevention and control of NCDs. But in 2007, we pioneered a different way to tackle the problem when the Heads of Governments in the Region held the first ever Summit on NCDs in Port of Spain, Trinidad. The Heads of Governments in CARICOM held this summit to underline its recognition that the NCDs represented a grave crisis.

10. It is the Port of Spain Declaration that led to the establishment of the Caribbean Wellness Day on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Saturday of September each year, a genuine health promotion event, if ever there was one. Caribbean Wellness Day is our call to action that prevention is at the heart of our response to the NCDs. Out of this declaration, too, the Billion Mile Challenge, modeled after Guyana's Million Mile Challenge, was born to ensure the promotion of physical activity among our peoples.
11. Chronic Disease Registers and Prevention, Treatment and Care Guidelines have been established in many countries and concerted actions against tobacco and substance abuse have been implemented. Caribbean Standards to regulate salt and trans-fat in food are under way. Treatment guidelines and specialized programs such as for foot care and for cervical cancers have been created.
12. A Caribbean Plan of Action for NCDs 2010-2014 have been drafted and represents our Road map to tackle the NCDs.
13. [Slide #10]: I returned now to the breaking news item – the UN Resolution (UNGA/64/L.52) passed last Thursday. This resolution truly paves the way for a truly Global Commitment and effective collective action to stem the tide and create a global empowerment for the Prevention and Control of NCDs. The resolution was presented by the representative of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago on behalf of CARICOM and supported by other countries of the Commonwealth and countries such as Spain and the US. I believe more than 50 countries from different Regions spoke in support of the resolution.
14. **The resolution calls on Member States and the international community to:**
  - **Convene a high-level meeting of the General Assembly in September 2011, with the participation of Heads of State and Government, on the prevention and control of**
  - **Include on the high-level plenary meeting to review the MDGs in September 2010 discussions on the rising incidences of NCDs and**
  - **Request the Secretary General to prepare a Global Status Report on the NCDS**
15. [Slide #11]: As Minister of Health from a developing country and as a Minister from a country of the Commonwealth, I believe we need to take advantage of these opportunities and the Commonwealth must play a pivotal role to craft a unique prevention and control of NCDs program. At the very least the Program must include some of these actions as outlined on the screen before us. These actions must include:
  - An MDG + with clear indicators for NCDs as a priority development issue. I believe the NCD Crisis is deserving of an MDG Goal by itself and not as a catch all together with other MDG indicators. It is for this reason I have been consistent now for 10 years calling for an MDG+. But I will compromise and add NCD indicators to Goal #6 under other diseases.

- We must begin this process at the high level meeting to review the MDGs at the UN in September 2010.
- Make the NCDs a priority development issue for development aid by countries and by development agencies.
- Agree on a Package of Publicly Guaranteed Health Services for the NCDs that becomes an entitlement for citizens everywhere.
- Consider a medicine and commodity facility for the NCDs to create affordability
- Develop an action plan to stop alcohol abuse. In this regards I commend India for declaring October 2<sup>nd</sup> as No Alcohol Day to highlight the ravages of alcohol on our societies. Guyana will observe this day in 2010.
- Regulate through standards and guidelines the food content of salt and trans-fat.
- Finally establish ethical guidelines and develop a program that will ensure reduced loss of health care providers from developing to developed countries.

16. [Slide #12]: I believe that this is a good time we give due regard to the impact of mental illnesses in our countries. Too often when we speak about the NCDs, we have not paid enough attention to mental illnesses. But neglect of this issue is immoral and foolish. The continued neglect of mental illnesses will see more homeless and indigent people in our countries, will leave more people impoverished and disabled, will see more deaths due to suicide, increase in substance abuse and increases in violence generally and in domestic and sexual abuse. I want to use this forum to again highlight the rather senseless neglect of mental illnesses.

17. [Slide #13]: Conclusion: There should be absolutely no doubt that the NCDs contribute significantly to the overall burden of diseases everywhere. What is clear too is that the plight is not merely the inevitable consequence of aging, as some persons would want us to believe. We are faced with an enormous challenge. It's not a new challenge and it did not come as a surprise, in the dead of night like HIV. It's been with us for a long time. Now that we have taken the wise move to give this problem the recognition due, we can make a difference and improve the future we guarantee ourselves and our children.

**Every child and every citizen of the world deserve to live a long, healthy, disability-free live. The accident of geography must not add a disadvantage when it comes to any citizen realizing this dream and empowered to make this dream a reality. The NCDs directly impose themselves as a mighty barrier for this dream to become a global reality for citizens in both developing and developed countries. Preventing and controlling NCDs must be a priority in our development programs now. Let us invest in the NCDs so that citizens, young and old, everywhere can believe we truly have the willingness and determination and the commitment to their welfare.**

Dr. Leslie Ramsammy

Minister of Health, Guyana

May 15, 2010