



SIDS Action on NCDs and Mental Health



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Title page photo: Health Promoting School in Fiji. Year 8 students Guna and Preyakshna enjoy their lunch during break at the Krishna Vedic School in Nausori, Fiji.

Photo credit: WHO / Faizza Tanggol

Photo on this page: High school students during their Physical Education class. Kolonia, Federated States of Micronesia.

Photo credit:WHO / Acer Apis

Introduction

Small Island Developing States (SIDS) are in the crossfires of multiple crises: climate change, loss of biodiversity, economic challenges, and health threats – including a disproportionate risk of dying prematurely from noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) and a high burden of mental health conditions. Momentum has been growing to support SIDS Member States in addressing NCDs and mental health conditions. The pivotal [SIDS Ministerial Conference](#) held in Barbados in June 2023 culminated in the 2023 [Bridgetown Declaration](#) on NCDs and mental health with a strong push to accelerate progress towards achieving SDG target 3.4 in these 39 Member States. Now, SIDS Member States are making specific commitments to take action by sharing their plans in the online [SIDS commitment page](#).

Objective

To connect, celebrate and support SIDS countries in championing action on NCDs and mental health. This periodic newsletter will spotlight individual commitments by SIDS Member States, share reflections from the voices of SIDS, and provide key updates on news and events.



Attendees of the event titled “Weaving a Healthy Commonwealth Aiga for Combating Noncommunicable Diseases and Promoting Mental Health” hold up a report on healthy ageing.
Photo credit: WHO / Tihati Devoe

Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting

Twenty-five SIDS countries are part of the Commonwealth, which held the [Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting \(CHOGM\)](#) on 21–26 October 2024 in Samoa. At a side event, during this gathering, high-level government leaders and multistakeholder partners took the opportunity to come together to strengthen their commitment to addressing NCDs and mental health.

The event, titled “[Weaving a Healthy Commonwealth Aiga for Combating Noncommunicable Diseases and Promoting Mental Health](#),” was jointly organized by the Ministry of Health, Samoa, the World Health Organization (WHO) Representative Office in Samoa, and the Commonwealth Secretariat.



“The Ministry of Health has successfully introduced the Package of Essential NCD Services (PEN) Fa’a Samoa’ into our communities, demonstrating our strong commitment to tackling NCDs and mental health issues. We continue to seek innovative ways to strengthen our partnerships with other sectors to reduce NCDs and improve mental health. The Samoan Government is dedicated to fostering these collaborations to ensure sustainable and impactful health outcomes for our people.”

Director General of Health, Professor Aiono Dr Alec Ekeroma



L–R: Dr Kim Eva Dickson, WHO Representative to Samoa, American Samoa, Cook Islands, Niue and Tokelau; Litara Ieremia-Allan, Miss Samoa 2024; and Reverend Ma’auga Motu, Pastor, Secretary of Samoa National Council of Churches.

Photo credit: WHO / Tihati Devoe

The event highlighted the importance of strong political commitment, partnerships and community involvement in tackling the global health challenges posed by NCDs and mental health issues. Participants from various sectors, including health, education, sports, finance, agriculture, trade, and media, shared their insights and strategies to create environments that promote healthier lifestyles and build more resilient health systems.

[Read more here.](#)

Country stories

The 2023 SIDS Ministerial Conference and Bridgetown Declaration laid the foundation for greater political commitment and targeted action. As a follow-up to the Bridgetown Declaration, countries have been encouraged to submit individual commitments for NCDs and mental health in the form of targets with specific deadlines and corresponding action plans in line with national and subnational priorities.

These targets and action plans address different risk factors including tobacco use, harmful use of alcohol, physical inactivity, unhealthy diet, and NCDs and mental health conditions through a range of policy areas, and are based on country specific context and epidemiology. These individual country commitments not only exhibit persistent efforts but also help accelerate progress towards the 2030 SDG targets.

All SIDS Member States are encouraged to submit their set of commitments, and more details can be found on the [SIDS Commitment webpage](#).

Cabo Verde

Boosting psychosocial support services by 2025



WHO Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus and Minister of Health of Cabo Verde Filomena Mendes Gonçalves visit to the Santa Cruz Health Centre in Cabo Verde on 11 January 2024.

Photo credit: WHO

The Government of Cabo Verde instituted a Mental health strategic plan 2021–2025 and declared [2024 as the year of mental health](#). The plan addresses a deficit of mental health professionals including psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, and occupational therapists, which has been a key barrier to progress. The Ministry of Health has committed to [strengthening mental health](#) support services by enhancing both human resources and health care facilities. The [suicide rate has been improving](#) since 2018.

At the national level, the Government commits to ensuring that 90% of primary health care facilities will have trained health professionals at various levels of care in relevant areas such as substance abuse, depressive disorders, psychological support, and others, by 2025. The Government also commits to establishing a day centre in the city of Praia to provide timely care to people to avoid recurrent hospitalizations due to mental health issues. These commitments reinforce the implementation of existing strategic plans aligned with [global guidelines](#), through which [Cabo Verde](#) aims to improve the quality of life of its population.

Fiji

Training 40% of PHC workers to deliver mental health services

It is estimated that 3% of the adult population of Fiji have severe mental disorders, yet only one in 10 people in Fiji who need mental health assistance are getting it. It is difficult for people living outside urban centers and there are just six health professionals for every 100 000 people. To increase accessibility to care, [Fiji is committed to](#) training 40% of health providers, in Government operated primary care facilities, in the identification and management of priority mental health conditions, by December 2025.

There are currently only 11 health facilities per 1000 people. To address this, the Ministry of Health and Medical Services aims to build capacity by building psychogeriatric, forensic, child and adolescent guidance and de-addiction clinics. Memory, child and adolescent guidance clinics are also planned in each stress management ward.

To achieve this target, Fiji is acting to incorporate mental health screening tools within the NCD and risk factor survey based on [WHO STEPS](#), continue implementation of the [WHO-Mental Health GAP training](#) and [Psychological First Aid in remote locations](#), ensure mental health promotion in schools and workplaces, and promote a drug free society.

A mind farm is envisioned which would encompass rehabilitation centres for de-addiction and recovery from chronic mental illnesses, a half-way home, centre for worried-well and occupational therapy centre. To improve services at tertiary care centres, the Government also aims to transform St Giles Hospital into the Regional Institute of Mental Health Care and Research (RIMCARE) by 2028.



The FEMAT team after the completion of the deployment exercise, Navunikabi Village, Namosi, Fiji.
Photo credit: WHO / Jason Chute

Micronesia

Reducing obesity by 5% by 2024



Mobile clinic staff providing NCDs screening, Pohnpei, Federated States of Micronesia.
Photo credit: WHO / Yoshi Shimizu

Childhood obesity is associated with a higher chance of NCD-related premature death and disability in adulthood. It also increases other risks, such as breathing difficulties, increased risk of fractures, hypertension, early markers of cardiovascular diseases, insulin resistance and psychological effects.

The prevalence of obesity in adults in the Federated States of Micronesia is more than triple the global average of 13%, with 76% of adults in Federated States of Micronesia estimated to be overweight. For children between 5–9 years old, there was a 25% prevalence, compared to the global average of 9%, indicating 1 in 4 children at risk for NCDs and associated issues.

The Federated States of Micronesia Government has committed to reduce the prevalence of obesity by 5% by 2024.

Recognizing the contribution of childhood obesity to NCDs in later life, the National Long Term NCD Prevention Plan heavily focuses on children and youth. It supports the implementation of school programmes, like the Health Promoting School programme which focuses on physical activity, as a national priority.

Working with young children and youth to adopt a healthy lifestyle is identified as a more effective long-term preventive method. The plan also calls for the use of school surveys in addition to adult surveys and clinic/hospital-based indicators. The Department of Health and Social Affairs will coordinate the establishment of a national NCD steering committee which will be a multisectoral group to champion the plan in all areas, guide its implementation, and monitor its progress.

Global Group of Heads of State and Government for the Prevention and Control of NCDs

The Third Gathering of the Global Group of Heads of State for NCDs convened on 24 September 2024, co-chaired by the Prime Minister of Antigua and Barbuda and the WHO Director-General. This high-profile event brought together heads of state and representatives from 21 Member States, including nine SIDS, along with key civil society organizations.

Delegates shared updates on NCD initiatives, showcased policy and legislative actions, and emphasized the importance of prioritizing NCDs and mental health in national and international agendas. The WHO Director-General highlighted a landmark US\$ 600 million investment from partners to support the global elimination of cervical cancer, and the co-chair country, Antigua and Barbuda, was recognized

for its pioneering efforts in the Caribbean region, being the first to set a cervical cancer elimination target, implement the WHO HEARTS package, increase taxation on alcohol and tobacco, ban high-sugar products in schools, and open new mental health treatment facilities. The President of the Commonwealth of Dominica reaffirmed the country's commitment for early detection of NCDs and emphasized the central role of community engagement across Dominica's NCD strategy.

The gathering served as a crucial platform to build momentum and strategize for the upcoming Fourth UN High-level Meeting on NCDs in 2025, underscoring the global commitment to addressing the growing challenge of NCDs and mental health issues.

Looking ahead to the [4th High-level Meeting of the United Nations General Assembly](#) when the Heads of States and Government will come together to set a vision to prevent and control NCDs towards 2030 and 2050 through a political declaration to be decided in the UN General Assembly



The Third Gathering of the Global Group of Heads of State and Government for the prevention and control of NCDs was convened on 24 September 2024 in New York.

Photo credit: WHO

“We must harness the momentum we have generated and ensure that our collective commitments are translated into tangible and certainly sustainable outcomes.”

His Excellency Mr Gaston Browne Prime Minister of Antigua and Barbuda

Voices of SIDS

Stories of persons with lived experience

In this section, we feature stories from advocates who might surprise you. Their stories tell us about the work they were inspired to do from the gravity of the experiences and crises they encountered within their own lives. In SIDS our crises have been the source of many powerful social movements. However, it is fair to say that much of our community action is happening in silos. The things that separate us are the reasons we must cast aside limiting beliefs and build our relationships and opportunities together. Doing this increases our impact, it forges alliances and connects the dots that otherwise remain unseen.

From my own experience building [First Citizens Sustainable Minds Youth Volunteer Programme's Youth Gatekeepers Initiative](#) with Mindwise Project and the First Citizens Foundation, I have seen the power of connecting existing networks instead of forging entirely new ones. We have brought together extraordinary groups such as the University of the West Indies, Rotary 7030, Rotaract 7030 and youth leadership organizations throughout the Caribbean to tackle one issue – the high rates of suicide in our region.

It is through the shared experiences and knowledge gathering that we will see how to build our future better, stronger and more resilient than before. In this issue, we celebrate those who are doing the work of forging this future – health professionals and advocacy leaders. Thank you for your partnership.



Majuro Atoll, Marshall Islands.
Photo credit: WHO / Eystein Grusd

Maria O'Brien
Focal point – voices of SIDS

Learn more about Mindwise and the Youth Gatekeepers Initiative at:

www.preventsuicidett.com/gatekeepers
www.mindwisett.org/volunteers

Grenada



Desarie Nicholas CariCope Wellness Alliance.
Photo credit: Desarie Nicholas

“Climate change is affecting us and we are not contributing on the level that other countries are to pollution. But we’re feeling most of the effects.”

One of the stark changes in mindset I’ve adapted from migrating to New York as a Caribbean girl is a sense of urgency to get things done. I returned to my homeland, Grenada for a family member’s wedding and the passage of hurricane Beryl became a sobering reminder that life in the Caribbean isn’t taken for granted by its people. Why rush and stress when most of an island’s structures can be wiped out within thirty minutes? That is what makes us a steadfast people – the recognition that because we endure through life changes, like Hurricane Ivan and Hurricane Beryl, we don’t rush, we are wise enough to know that we don’t know what we are rushing to.

The hardest part of Beryl was knowing that my grandfather was on the island of Carriacou, where they had never experienced a direct hit from a hurricane. For a Category 4 storm to hit one of the smaller islands: that was really scary.

We got calls during the storm that his roof went. And then the days after were really hard because Carriacou lost all connection: you weren’t sure who was ok. It took a few days before someone said, “oh, we saw your grandfather”. Then we learned that when his roof went the wind picked him up and threw him down and he hid in the bathroom for the rest of the storm.

This hurricane will change things in terms of people’s level of preparedness on that island, because this was their first major storm. It’ll change the way they build their houses. Even with the level of resilience that they have there’s also just a lot of loss. Climate change is affecting us and we are not contributing on the level that other countries are to pollution. But we’re feeling most of the effects. I hope that more is done from the more developed countries to help mitigate some of those issues and to help with the rebuilding process. No matter how meticulously you plan, mother nature seems to pave her own way.

Small Island Developing States: Standing together on NCDs and mental health

A [recent Lancet article](#) lays out reasons for optimism for the future of Small Island Developing States. Drawing on the momentum of the 2024 Antigua and Barbuda Agenda for SIDS (ABAS), key experts highlight urgent health priorities for SIDS in the next decade, emphasizing the need to address NCDs and mental health and outlining strategies and recommendations to improve health outcomes.

WHO global oral health meeting

The first [WHO global oral health meeting](#) accelerated progress towards universal health coverage for oral health by 2030. Hosted by the Government of the Kingdom of Thailand from 26 to 29 November 2024, this technical meeting with WHO, national oral health leads, national UHC programme leads and invited experts, was followed by a half-day high-level segment inviting health ministers and senior leaders from non-State actors to discuss and reaffirm their commitments to support the implementation of the [Global oral health action plan 2023–2030](#) and national oral health roadmaps.

2nd WHO symposium on meaningful engagement of people living with NCDs, mental health, and neurological conditions

This December 2024 event offered a [platform for knowledge exchange and collaboration](#), facilitating strategic alliances between individuals with lived experience and its Member States, and developing strategic inputs towards the upcoming Fourth High-level Meeting on NCDs in September 2025. Launched by the Global Coordination Mechanism on NCDs, it convened individuals with lived experience, through formally recognizing their knowledge and expertise in co-creating and co-implementing NCD policies, programmes, and services that are responsible, equitable, holistic, and contextually appropriate.



Dr Doreen Mani, Subdivisional Medical Officer for Serua/Namosi, Navua Hospital, Fiji.
Photo credit: WHO / Faizza Tanggol

Looking ahead:

Responding to the call of the 2023 SIDS ministerial conference

Following the 2023 SIDS ministerial conference and the adoption of the Bridgetown Declaration, WHO has been responsive to the call from our Member States for the resource mobilization and capacity building required to tackle the impact of NCDs and address the unique challenges and vulnerabilities driving the NCD epidemic across SIDS.

As part of these efforts, WHO has established the Global Small ISLAND Initiative – Investing in Structural and Lasting Action on Noncommunicable Diseases.

This initiative aims to provide the financial, technical and other resources needed to operationalize the Bridgetown Declaration's actions. Over an initial two-year pilot phase, the Initiative will engage 12 to 14 SIDS, using the proven convening and technical assistance model of the Partnership for Healthy Cities.

We warmly invite potential donors to contact us directly at arnoldv@who.int or mchardyj@who.int. Additionally, we encourage colleagues and partners to share any suggestions for potential funders who may support this initiative.



Village life in Pohnpei, City Pohnpei, Federated States of Micronesia.
Photo credit: WHO / Yoshi Shimizu