



UN Task Force: urgent action needed to respond to the epidemic of premature deaths from noncommunicable in Barbados

Bridgetown | Friday 17 April, 2015: Barbados is now engaged in an all-out campaign to reduce the toll of heart disease and strokes, cancers, diabetes, and respiratory diseases, forging ahead with a whole-of-government response to prevent and control these conditions, in order to protect the health of its people and protect national development and sustain economic growth, a United Nations Task Force found during a weeklong mission to the country that finishes today.

These chronic conditions, known as noncommunicable diseases (NCDs), account for 84% of deaths suffered by Barbadians. The probability of dying prematurely, i.e. between ages 30 and 70 years from the four main causes of NCDs is 14% in Barbados. More than one half of the victims of NCDs are among those younger than 70 years old. NCDs are now having a grave socioeconomic impact on Barbados and are a drain on the national economy. The aim of the joint United Nations mission was to support government reduce premature deaths from NCDs in Barbados in line with the World Health Organization's (WHO) voluntary global target of a 25% reduction in premature mortality from NCDs by 2025.

This week's mission to Barbados, which ends 17 April, was a first visit to the Caribbean region by the United Nations Interagency Task Force on the Prevention and Control of NCDs. The Task Force included representatives from WHO, FAO, UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF, and UN Women. Over the week, the Task Force has been working with the government of Barbados and the UN Country Team to build and share solutions for the response to NCDs.

The mission concluded that NCDs in Barbados are now a real concern and cause significant premature mortality. Particular concern is that one third of adults in Barbados are obese, one third have raised blood pressure and a fifth have diabetes. The mission has highlighted the main risk factors for NCDs in Barbados as unhealthy diet, physical inactivity, tobacco use and the harmful use of alcohol.

Increasing disposable income, sedentary lifestyles and acquired tastes for high fat, salty and sugary foods have contributed to the epidemic of NCDs. The heavy reliance on motorized transportation and ease of access to tobacco and alcohol products have all contributed to the NCD burden.

"The Government of Barbados recognizes that it cannot manage the ever increasing burden of NCDs by treating people with these conditions. We simply cannot afford to do this. What we have to do is prevent these diseases in the first place. Working to prevent NCDs is the best investment for our children. This is now a priority for the Government and is now being taken with utmost seriousness at the highest levels of

government. We therefore welcome the support of the Task Force in helping us tackle NCDs” – Hon. John Boyce (Minister of Health of Barbados).

The Barbados Strategic Plan for the Prevention and Control of NCDs, 2015-2019 was published earlier this year. It sets out an approach for all parts of government to work together to combat the NCD epidemic. “We recognize that the Ministry of Health cannot respond to the challenges of preventing NCDs alone. Our national NCD policy highlights the importance of healthy eating and increasing physical activity as well as the need to reduce the use of tobacco and the harmful use of alcohol. Implementing nation-wide policies to reduce these factors requires the inputs of ministries right across government, as well as the involvement of academia, NGOs and the private sector. Ministries such as finance, foreign affairs and trade, transport, labor and education are all critical in mounting an effective response in preventing NCDs.” - Barton Clarke (Chief Agricultural Officer, Barbados).

“The United Nations is committed to support Barbados scale up action to tackle NCDs. The levels of NCDs are very worrying and we are pleased that the government is taking this issue so seriously. There are clear evidence-based interventions for tackling NCDs at the population level, for example to reduce salt, sugar and fat intake. These are highly cost effective and feasible to undertake. If implemented they can result in dramatic reductions in NCDs over a fairly short period of time. The government is now well placed to deliver on its NCD strategy” - Dr Oleg Chestnov, (Assistant Director-General for Noncommunicable Diseases and Mental Health, World Health Organization).

The UN Task Force was established by the UN Secretary-General in June 2013 and placed under WHO’s leadership. It is coordinating the activities of the relevant UN organizations and other intergovernmental bodies to help realize the Heads of State commitments in the 2011 UN Political Declaration on NCDs, in particular by implementing the WHO Global Action Plan for the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases 2013–2020 and the 2014 UN Outcome Document on NCDs.

Globally, over 14 million people die each year from NCDs between the ages of 30 and 70. It is estimated that up to two-thirds of premature deaths are linked to exposure to risk factors (namely, tobacco use, unhealthy diet and physical inactivity, and the harmful use of alcohol) and up to half of all such deaths are linked to weak health systems that do not respond effectively and equitably to the health-care needs of people with NCDs.

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