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OF PUBLIC HEALTH

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A POLICY BRIEF BY OLUWAFISOLAMI OLAGBEMI

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case study



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A Policy Brief by

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BACKGROUND:

In recent years, the global health landscape has witnessed a shifting burden of disease from infectious to non-communicable diseases (NCDs), presenting a critical challenge for Low- and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs). This urgent call to action delves into the pressing issue of NCDs and focuses on Nigeria as a compelling case study. As NCDs continue to escalate, particularly in LMICs like Nigeria, understanding the underlying factors, exploring potential interventions, and analyzing the country's experiences can provide invaluable insights to inform comprehensive strategies aimed at reducing the burden of NCDs and fostering a healthier future for millions. This article sheds light on the multifaceted dimensions of the NCD crisis, underscores the urgency of addressing it, and highlights the significance of Nigeria's journey in inspiring effective responses to this global health challenge.

Processed foods that are high in additives and often less nutritious have become more affordable due to subsidies, contributing to a widespread habit of unhealthy eating in low- and middle-income countries. Besides poor dietary choices, other major factors that increase the risk of NCDs include excessive alcohol consumption, smoking, exposure to air pollution, and lack of physical activity. The inadequate attention given to NCDs has led to a significant increase in conditions like diabetes, hypertension, mental health disorders, cardiovascular diseases, and respiratory illnesses. Aging populations and growing industrialization also play a role in the rise of NCDs.

While these diseases have reached epidemic levels, there is considerable potential for their prevention through the elimination of risk factors, early diagnosis, and effective treatment. Shockingly, NCDs are responsible for more deaths globally than all other causes combined. Among these, four major NCDs—cardiovascular disease, cancer, respiratory illnesses, and diabetes—account for a staggering 84% of the total mortality.

In LMICs, where managing communicable diseases such as HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis is already challenging, over three-quarters of NCD-related deaths occur, exacerbating existing health

burdens. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), approximately 41 million deaths each year can be attributed to NCDs.

NIGERIA'S CURRENT POSITION ON NCD BURDENS:

Nigeria finds itself at a critical juncture in the face of the burgeoning burden of NCDs, even as communicable diseases maintain their prominence as the leading causes of mortality. While communicable diseases persist as a formidable challenge, NCDs are rapidly emerging as a significant threat to the realization of universal health goals, both globally and within Nigeria.

The gravity of the situation demands immediate attention, as failure to undertake purposeful preventive measures could exert profound strain on economic outcomes and escalate the burden in the years ahead.¹ Forecasts indicate an alarming trajectory, with the projected global economic cost of NCDs between 2010 and 2030 estimated at an astonishing USD 47 trillion—an equivalent of 75% of the world's GDP in 2010.

The prevalence of NCDs in low- and middle-income countries is exacerbated by various systemic shortcomings, including inadequate financing and budget allocation, suboptimal healthcare delivery for NCD patients, inadequate policy implementation, and low levels of NCD literacy. These challenges converge to create an environment conducive to the widespread proliferation of NCDs, posing a substantial obstacle to public health².

Within Nigeria, the ascent of NCDs is alarming, with cancer, diabetes, mental illnesses, respiratory and cardiovascular diseases, and mental disorders witnessing a sharp increase in prevalence.³ Approximately 24% of all deaths in Nigeria are now attributed to NCDs,

¹ World Economic Forum. (2011). The Global Economic Burden of Non-Communicable Diseases. Retrieved from https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Harvard_HE_GlobalEconomicBurdenNonCommunicableDiseases_2011.pdf

² Beaglehole, R., Bonita, R., Horton, R., Adams, C., Alleyne, G., Asaria, P., ... & Dain, K. (2011). Priority actions for the non-communicable disease crisis. *The Lancet*, 377(9775), 1438-1447.

³ World Health Organization. (2018). Noncommunicable diseases country profiles 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/nmh/publications/ncd-profiles-2018/en/>

underscoring the urgency of addressing this issue to safeguard public health and ensure sustainable development.

As Nigeria confronts the multifaceted challenge of NCDs, it is imperative to adopt comprehensive strategies that encompass policy reforms, increased healthcare investment, enhanced public awareness, and community-based interventions. By doing so, Nigeria can play a pivotal role in not only mitigating the NCD burden within its borders but also offering insights and solutions that resonate across the wider landscape of LMICs.

WHAT REALISTIC MEASURES CAN WE TAKE TO ACHIEVE REDUCED NCD PREVALENCE?

Non-communicable disease is a risk factor for another non-communicable diseases. Given this biological understanding, to successfully reduce non-communicable diseases, it is critically important to tackle NCDs one patient at a time.

it is only expected that we must work to realistically achieve decreased levels of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) across worldwide populations, specifically amongst low income earning populations.

Given the extensive discussion of the risk factors, epidemiology, burdens, and implications of non-communicable diseases. In this context, "we" refers to both public and private organizations, governmental entities, civil society organizations, community-based organizations, decision-makers in politics, lawmakers, nutrition-focused organizations, media outlets, and every single person within a population.

Everyone has a stake in reducing the prevalence of NCDs, whether they realize it or not. As a result, we must all work to achieve this goal by putting a Universal Health Coverage (UHC) lens on all initiatives aimed at restoring robust health systems.

The risk factors for NCDs and the modifiable health risk behaviors should be given the utmost consideration. These risk factors include but are not limited to: alcohol, smoking, use of tobacco, unhealthy eating, lack of exercise or physical inactivity, heredity, lack of vitamins,

hormonal imbalance, poor health literacy, climate change, and consumerism of an unhealthy lifestyle.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES:

As previously stated, non-communicable diseases have had a huge negative impact on health outcomes, causing 24% of the world's 206 million people to die each year. We must work harder than ever to improve health outcomes and stop the spread of non-communicable illnesses.

Through relevant studies conducted, A few noteworthy recommendations have been highlighted,

- 1. Tobacco Control Measures:** Implementing stringent anti-tobacco policies is imperative, given the alarming rise in tobacco consumption in Nigeria. Strengthening the National Tobacco Control Act is vital, accompanied by robust enforcement and penalties for violations. Bans on smoking in public spaces and prominent display of health warnings on tobacco products can curb tobacco use.
- 2. Alcohol Taxation and Regulation:** Elevating taxes on alcohol brewing companies can generate funds for NCD prevention and treatment. Regulatory bodies such as SON, NAFDAC, FIRS, and SIRS should collaborate to ensure proper implementation and effective utilization of increased tax revenue. Concurrently, awareness campaigns on the adverse effects of excessive alcohol consumption should be integrated into marketing efforts.
- 3. Enhanced Data Governance Policies:** Developing accountable data governance policies, including access, management, standardization, and usage, is vital. Implementing these recommendations will facilitate evidence-based decision-making, support research, and enhance policy formulation and implementation.
- 4. Curbing Unhealthy Dietary Habits:** Stringent policies to discourage the consumption of artificial trans fats, highly processed foods, and sugar-sweetened beverages are essential. Bans

on trans fats and imposing taxes on unhealthy foods can reduce obesity rates and associated NCD risks. The accountability framework should ensure effective implementation of these policies.

5. Reinforced Physical Health Education: Strengthening physical health education (PHE) curriculum is pivotal in promoting active lifestyles among students.

THE WAY FORWARD:

Addressing the pressing challenge of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) in Low- and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs) necessitates a concerted and collaborative effort. Policymakers, healthcare providers, civil society, and the private sector must join forces to design and implement evidence-based strategies that prioritize prevention, early detection, and effective management of NCDs.

Enhancing NCD literacy and awareness through targeted public health campaigns is crucial to empower individuals to make informed lifestyle choices. Strengthening healthcare systems, ensuring equitable access to quality care, and integrating NCD management into existing health services are vital steps toward curbing the NCD epidemic. Additionally, robust data collection, research, and evaluation will provide the insights needed to refine interventions and track progress.

Ultimately, by embracing a comprehensive and holistic approach, LMICs can collectively pave the way for a healthier future, reduce the NCD burden, and fulfill the shared goal of achieving universal health and well-being.

LMICs should adopt healthier lifestyle options and develop policies that promote social and behavioural change with the aim of tackling NCDs.

Furthermore, already existing policies that address NCDs should be well implemented. Higher budgetary allowance should be allocated for NCD treatment and prevention.

CONCLUSION:

In conclusion, the escalating burden of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) in Low- and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs), with Nigeria as a representative case study, underscores the imperative for immediate action. While communicable diseases remain a critical concern, the burgeoning prevalence of NCDs poses a formidable threat to public health, socioeconomic development, and the achievement of universal health goals.

The stark reality of the situation demands a comprehensive and multi-faceted approach. Adequate financing, robust healthcare infrastructure, effective policy implementation, and enhanced NCD literacy must form the cornerstone of strategies aimed at curbing the NCD epidemic. Nigeria's experience serves as a cautionary tale, highlighting the urgency of addressing systemic challenges that perpetuate NCDs.