

VIDEO ADDRESS

**Diabetes Summit for Latin America
(Salvador da Bahia, Brazil, 30 June 2010 - 2 July 2010)**

Opening statement by
Dr Ala Alwan
Assistant Director-General
World Health Organization

Honourable Minister of Health, Honourable Governor of the State of Bahia, Dr Mirta Roses, excellencies, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

First, let me thank the State of Bahia and the World Diabetes Foundation for organizing and hosting this international conference. I would have been honoured to be part of this important gathering, but conflicting commitments have prevented me from travelling.

Let me begin by saying that diabetes has many faces - but very few voices. This is why I am grateful that the Honourable Minister of Health has taken such a strong leadership role in giving a voice to the challenges faced by the millions of people with diabetes living in developing countries. I also wish to pay tribute to His Excellency for working to ensure that the response to diabetes is placed at the forefront of national and global efforts to improve health and to support sustainable development.

The case of diabetes in Brazil and in most countries reveals that the prevention of diabetes and noncommunicable diseases has important implications for poverty reduction and economic development.

We now know that mortality from these health problems is rising considerably, and that health systems are overwhelmed by the increasing burden of cases of diabetes and other noncommunicable diseases. We also know that we must make the prevention and control of noncommunicable diseases a top priority of the development agenda.

I welcome the determination demonstrated in the objectives of this international conference. You are supporting countries in the region to renew their commitment to implement national policies and plans for the prevention and control of diabetes, as part of noncommunicable disease plans.

This Summit is an opportunity to review the magnitude of diabetes and its impact on health and socio-economic development, to assess where we are in addressing this challenge in this part of the world, and to agree on scaling up action to prevent and control diabetes. In this respect, let me underscore four points that I firmly believe to be of importance.

My first point is a message of clear reality. In all developing countries and by any measure, diabetes and other noncommunicable

diseases now account for a large enough share of premature deaths and poverty to merit a concerted and coordinated public policy response. And I mean public policy response in all sectors. Experience in Brazil provides one example of how more health gains in terms of prevention are achieved by influencing public policies in domains such as trade, agriculture, food production, industry, urban development and taxation, than by changes in health policy alone.

Let me elaborate on the magnitude: Noncommunicable diseases cause more than 35 million deaths per year globally. More than 8 million deaths from noncommunicable diseases occur before the age of 60 and occur in developing countries. We are therefore talking about more than 8 million people who die too young from diabetes, heart attacks, strokes, cancers, or chronic lung diseases.

If we fail to tackle noncommunicable diseases, deaths from these diseases are forecast to increase by 16 per cent in the Americas, between 2005 and 2015.

Brazil understands very well how the epidemic of diabetes and other noncommunicable diseases is growing faster in developing countries. Brazil is also witnessing how the poor are disproportionately affected. A similar pattern is emerging from studies in other countries, which are starting to document how poor populations are losing household income from unhealthy behaviours, from poor physical status and loss of productivity, from the cost of long-term health care and from the resulting catastrophic health expenditures.

Indeed, the picture is rapidly revealing how the epidemic of noncommunicable diseases is threatening to overwhelm health systems in developing countries and how it is slowing economic growth. Populations in developing countries are dying too young from noncommunicable diseases, and most often during their most productive years.

My second point is a message about prevention and how effective it is. We now have proven and affordable solutions to prevent more than 8 million premature deaths from diabetes and other noncommunicable diseases in developing countries every year.

I can give specific examples to illustrate this. If we want to address the rapid rise in deaths from diabetes and other noncommunicable diseases, it is essential to seriously address the common modifiable risk factors. Multisectoral actions against tobacco use, unhealthy dietary trends, physical inactivity and the harmful use of alcohol are key to prevention. Prevention of diabetes is possible. We now have cost-effective interventions that are affordable, even in low-income countries. Indeed, prevention is the most feasible approach for many developing countries.

Although prevention is a top priority, the provision of health care services continues to remain a central issue. Countries need help to strengthen and reorient their health-care systems if they are to be able

to respond to the health-care needs of people with diabetes and other noncommunicable diseases.

To bring about such changes in primary care, many health care systems will have to implement measures, consistent with the reforms recommended in the World Health Report 2008, in order to ensure access to a package of essential interventions for health care for people with diabetes.

In May 2008, Member States at the World Health Assembly endorsed a six-year Action Plan to implement the Global Strategy for the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases. This Action Plan is unique because it was developed jointly between Member States, WHO and international partners. It is also distinctive because it contains 6 objectives with 3 sub-sets of actions for implementation during the 6-year time-frame: by countries, by WHO and by international partners, many of whom are present today. The Action Plan is an objective and evidence-based road map for those who are determined to prevent diabetes and other noncommunicable diseases. As requested by the World Health Assembly, I invite countries to translate the sets of action for Member States under each of the 6 objectives into a national action plan. WHO stands ready to support you in this task.

Ladies & gentlemen

Addressing diabetes is a national responsibility. We have learned how much can be achieved by maximizing the use of scarce local

resources. However, many developing countries will need new resources.

That brings me to my third point, which is a call for action. Many developing countries can benefit from technical support to address diabetes and other noncommunicable diseases, and to implement the Action Plan. However, unfortunately, requests for technical support go largely unanswered by the international community and development agencies, partly because these health problems are not included in the Millennium Development Goals.

In July 2009, the United Nations Economic and Social Council, ECOSOC, adopted a Ministerial Declaration which emphasized that diabetes is a debilitating and costly disease associated with severe complications. The Ministerial Declaration called for urgent action to implement the Global Strategy for the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases and its Action Plan. Yet, international development agencies continue to remain unresponsive and persist in investing only a negligible proportion of Official Development Assistance to support developing countries in this area.

It is crucial that policy makers and tax payers in prosperous countries realize that they also stand to gain from preventing and controlling diabetes and noncommunicable diseases in developing countries. Clearly, achievements in prevention will have a major positive impact, not only on international health, but also on global development. WHO is collaborating with the World Economic Forum in

sending a clear message, which is based on the results of surveys reported in its Global risks Reports for 2009 and 2010, that noncommunicable diseases are among the leading macroeconomic risks worldwide. Besides, addressing diabetes and noncommunicable diseases will contribute to the achievements of the Millennium Development Goals.

I therefore thank Brazil for its vision in co-sponsoring a resolution in the United Nations last month which calls on the General Assembly to convene a High-level Meeting in September 2011, with the participation of Heads of State and Government, on the prevention and control of noncommunicable diseases. The resolution also encourages governments to include in their discussions at the MDG Summit in September 2010 a statement on the rising incidence of noncommunicable diseases, with a particular focus on the development challenges faced by developing countries.

This is a major development and WHO will be working closely with countries to support the processes that will lead to the General Assembly Meeting. We are confident that these new developments will find resonance among the leaders in Foreign Policy and Development about what we, collectively, want to achieve in making international development policies more inclusive and more responsive to the noncommunicable disease challenge.

This Summit will serve as a Forum where key stakeholders in the area of noncommunicable diseases, important opinion leaders,

international nongovernmental organizations and international media can interact in creating a network that is committed in driving the agenda on prevention and care in the developing world.

In this respect, I invite you to join the Global Noncommunicable Diseases network (NCDnet), which was launched by WHO during the High Level Segment of the Economic and Social Council in Geneva last year. The Global Forum of NCDnet organized a successful first meeting on 24 February this year and NCDnet's aims are shared by many - strengthening partnerships for stronger advocacy, better resource mobilization and scaling up the implementation of the Action Plan of the Global Strategy for the prevention of Noncommunicable Diseases.

Ladies & Gentlemen

There is also a pressing need for national authorities to accord a higher priority and stronger political commitment to the prevention of diabetes and other noncommunicable diseases. The Global Strategy for the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases, and its Action Plan, identify three priorities that all countries must address: (1) establishing a surveillance system as an integral part of the national health information system; (2) reducing exposure to risk level to prevent disease; (3) and improving health care with emphasis on primary health care.

I therefore applaud and welcome Brazil's initiative to shine the spotlight on diabetes and other noncommunicable diseases in developing countries. I also hope that others will follow this example in demonstrating their commitment to global solidarity in the face of millions of poor people in developing countries who are driven even deeper into poverty by the costs of diabetes care or the absence of prevention efforts.

Perhaps now, some of our long-standing arguments about prevention and control of diabetes in developing countries will have a greater chance of being heard by all international stakeholders. The price for delaying action will be grave and measured in human lives.

I wish you fruitful discussions and a productive meeting.

Thank you.