

## Responding to the Asia/Pacific NCD crisis

Noncommunicable diseases (NCDs), principally cardiovascular diseases, cancer, diabetes and chronic respiratory diseases, are the leading causes of death in the Asian/Pacific region. The region includes countries such as Australia which have had major successes in reducing NCD death rates with a comprehensive approach. By contrast, in China where 80% of deaths are due to NCDs, the response to NCDs is at a very early stage. Smaller island countries of the Pacific have declared a “state of health emergency” because of the toll of NCDs.

A milestone in the response to the NCD crisis was achieved in New York in September with the adoption of the Political Declaration of the High-Level Meeting of the General Assembly of the UN on the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases. The Declaration recognises the enormous health and economic burdens imposed by NCDs on all countries and firmly positions NCDs as a development, and not just a health, issue. This is an essential reframing for the discussions in the run up to the post-Millennium Development Goals era beginning in 2015. It would have been ideal for the Declaration to have included time-bound goals and targets. However, it incorporates many of the recommendations made by civil society and, in addition, stresses research and development and international cooperation including access to medicines under the flexibilities of the trade-related aspects of intellectual property rights agreement.

The major task now is to encourage the successful delivery of the four key short-term commitments agreed in the Declaration by member states and global institutions, including WHO: the development of a comprehensive global monitoring framework, including “voluntary” global targets and national indicators by the end of 2012; the preparation of options by the end of 2012 for an effective partnership to carry forward multisectoral actions; the strengthening of multisectoral national policies and plans for the prevention and treatment of NCDs by 2013 and their implementation; and the preparation of a report on the commitments in the Political Declaration as the basis of a comprehensive review by 2014.

Most countries in the Asia/Pacific region, with the notable exception of China, already have national policies and plans for the prevention and treatment of NCDs. Often missing, however, are the resources – human and financial – to implement and evaluate programmes. The development of innovative national funding schemes is critical. Lack of funding should not be an excuse for lack of action since there are positive experiences from low- and middle-income countries for raising funds from additional taxes on tobacco and alcohol for health promotion. Most importantly, countries must include NCDs in their development agendas and thus assure the cooperation of the Development agencies as was promised in the Paris Declaration.

Momentum generated by the UN Declaration will be strengthened by a civil society movement which is proactive and politically focussed and able to work cooperatively with global and national institutions. Political momentum will be kept high if NCDs are prominent on the agendas of the major regional and global meetings such as the G-20 in Mexico and the Rio+20 in Brazil in 2012. Finally, the overarching goal is to reduce the huge health and economic burdens of NCDs in the Asia/Pacific region by ensuring that NCDs remain central to regional and global development.