

JOINT HIGH-LEVEL SESSION OF THE OAS PERMANENT COUNCIL AND
THE INTER-AMERICAN COUNCIL FOR INTEGRAL DEVELOPMENT

Monday, March 19, 2018
10:00am – 1:00pm
OAS Main Building, Hall of the Americas
17th St and Constitution Ave
Washington, DC

Opening remarks by Dr. Carissa Etienne

Honorable Juan Aníbal Barría, Permanent Representative of Chile and Chair of the Permanent Council,

Honorable Carlos Alberto Calles, Permanent Representative of El Salvador and Chair of the Inter-American Council for Integral Development,

Honorable Selwin Charles Hart, Permanent Representative of Barbados,

Ambassador Nestor Mendez, Assistant Secretary General of the Organization of American States,

Sir George Alleyne, Director Emeritus, PAHO

Distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

Good morning,

It is a pleasure for me to participate in this joint high-level session of the OAS Permanent Council and the Inter-American Council for Integral Development on NCDs and to share my perspectives on how you, as ambassadors and representatives of your countries, can help to address one of the most critical issues hampering sustainable development in the Americas, that is, non-communicable diseases or NCDs.

You may be wondering why a health topic, as specific as NCDs, is being brought to the attention of the Permanent Council; particularly when PAHO, as a specialized agency of the OAS, is already dealing with this public health matter.

Well, there are three compelling reasons to bring NCDs to your urgent attention.

First and foremost, is the tremendous and overwhelming impact on the development of our societies, of these four diseases – cardiovascular diseases, cancer, diabetes, and chronic

respiratory diseases; and their four risk factors- tobacco use, harmful use of alcohol, poor diet and physical inactivity.

Each year, NCDs result in the loss of lives of 5.2 million people in the Americas. That is more than the entire population of a country, such as Costa Rica.

And over a third of the people dying from NCDs are under 70 years of age, dying prematurely and in the prime of their lives.

But that's not all, over 200 million people are estimated to be living with an NCD and require chronic, long term care and access to essential medicines from the health system.

As a result, the economic toll of NCDs is enormous, with the associated loss of income, loss in productivity from the massive numbers of premature deaths, rising health care costs, as well as household expenses for NCD care.

In our region, for example, NCDs will lead to a loss of 7% of GDP in Peru, each year for the next fifteen years. In Jamaica, as another example, the loss will be equivalent to 4% of GDP, and in Costa Rica, 4.4%. With losses as significant as these, the sustainable development goals will certainly not be attainable.

We must, therefore, halt this scourge from NCDs. And this can only be done with stronger public policies across all government sectors.

This brings me to my second point, about why I am bringing the issue of NCDs to your attention.

Evidence has shown that regulatory policy from the departments of finance, trade, labor, agriculture, social development, and education, among others, can have a greater impact on preventing and controlling NCDs, than do health sector policies.

For example, increasing tobacco taxes and prices is considered **THE** most cost-effective intervention to reduce tobacco use, while simultaneously generating additional government revenue. Many countries in our region have begun to increase tobacco taxes, but perhaps the country that stands out as a leader in tobacco control in our region is Uruguay, which has enacted strong tobacco control legislation and recently won a battle against Philip Morris to uphold its regulations. I urge you and your government, let us all follow Uruguay's example to impose stronger regulations to reduce tobacco use and save lives.

Another fiscal policy which is known to be effective is taxation of sugar-sweetened beverages and policies to promote healthy diets. Several countries in our region, including Mexico and Barbados have instituted increased taxes on sugar sweetened beverages, and others, such as Canada, Chile and Ecuador have used regulatory policies, such as front of package labelling, to inform consumers about nutrient content and healthy eating.

But serious constraints, driven by industry and economic interests, as well as trade promotion interests, have impeded the implementation of pro-health fiscal and regulatory policies, using an all of government approach.

As political leaders and ambassadors to the Organization of American States, you are in a strategic position of influence to overcome these impediments, and promote a “whole of government” approach to reduce the burden of NCDs and contribute to social and economic development, through improved health of the population.

So my appeal to you is to promote a “health-in-all policies approach” across your government, and ensure that legislation, regulation and policies are in place that reduce NCDs and promote health.

Lastly, I bring this issue before you because in September, at the United Nations, Heads of State/ Heads of Government from around the World will unite for the third UN High-level Meeting on NCDs to review progress since the first meeting in 2011.

Commitments made by world leaders at the High Level Meetings in 2011 and again in 2014 to reduce premature deaths from NCDs have unfortunately not been followed through.

While there are undeniable examples of progress in some countries, progress has been slow and uneven and no significant regional impact has been achieved to reduce NCDs.

Bolder commitments from all sectors are needed at the third UN High Level Meeting to ensure that all countries can collectively reach the Sustainable Development Goal target 3.4, to reduce premature mortality from NCDs by one third by 2030.

I urge you to talk with your Presidents/Prime Ministers, and move now to ensure that there is a strong, high level, informed participation from your country at the UN NCD meeting in September.

Honorable members of this august chamber, the message is clear – what has been done thus far is inadequate. And I would like to state unequivocally, that progress on NCDs depends on national governments, working together with civil society, and the private sector, to put people’s health first, ahead of politics, ahead of profits, and ahead of self-promotion.

Thank you for your attention and for your support to moving the NCD agenda forward.