



Speech given by Bola Ojo, Executive Director of the World Heart  
Federation Africa Network

“Health and Development: held back by non-communicable diseases”

It is my privilege to speak to you, on behalf of the World Heart Federation, to highlight the importance of getting the growing burden of non-communicable diseases (NCDs), in the developing world, under control. And demonstrate why, without the injection of essential funds this will inevitably spiral out of control, leaving already strained economies at breaking point and pushed further into the poverty trap.

The statistics tell us that 35 million deaths a year are caused by NCDs, which amounts to 60% of global mortality. Cardiovascular disease accounts for half of that burden or an estimated 17.2 million deaths. 80% of deaths occur in low- and middle-income countries, such as those in the Africa region. But what does that mean in terms of the individuals living this reality and how do NCDs impact their daily lives?

NCDs are by far the leading cause of death and disability in every region of the world, except, today, for Sub-Saharan Africa, where infectious diseases are still rife. Yet even in Africa NCDs exert a very heavy toll, which is rising fast. Africans are placed under a double

burden of disease: a high mortality and morbidity due to infectious diseases (such as HIV/AIDS) coupled with increasing rates of NCDs.

The common misconception is that NCDs are “Western diseases” but when you consider, for example, that death rates from stroke are up to 10 times higher in the United Republic of Tanzania than in the UK. And that an estimated 20 million people in Africa have high blood pressure, a major risk factor for heart disease and stroke, it is clear to see that diseases perceived as affecting mainly wealthy industrialized countries are becoming increasingly prevalent in Africa and represent an emerging threat.

In fact, NCD deaths, while dropping in developed countries, are rapidly rising in most developing countries. The majority of NCDs can be prevented if the three main modifiable risk factors, unhealthy diet, physical inactivity, and tobacco use, are controlled. However, in Africa these risk factors are increasingly linked to urbanization and globalization. As people move out of villages and into cities, a traditional diet rich in fruit and vegetables is gradually being replaced by one rich in calories from animal fats and low in complex carbohydrates. This dietary change is combined with a decrease in physical activity as people move away from traditional farming into sedentary jobs.

Tobacco is also becoming an increasing problem, as regulations become stricter in the West, the tobacco industry has set its sights on the developing world, particularly targeting youth.

In Africa, 44% of people are below the age of 15 years and as these children and young people grow into adults they will carry with them the risks accumulated from early life spent in increasingly unhealthy cities, adopting risk behaviours and burdened by the metabolic legacy of under-nutrition in their childhood.

Unless we act now, in middle-age they will become a health-poor generation, with early onset of diabetes, heart disease, stroke, cancer and chronic respiratory disease, hitting adults in their most productive years. This will have a catastrophic impact on the economy and already weakened health systems.

The tremendous knowledge gaps that exist both among the patients and the healthcare professionals will further exacerbate the problem. For example, half of the 1,000 patients from one study set in Nigeria were not aware of the beneficial effects of physical activity and no smoking. A substantial amount, were also unaware of the beneficial effects of a low salt heart-healthy diet.

Many patients in Africa are under-diagnosed or wrongly diagnosed, others die prematurely of preventable complications, due to the deficiencies that exist in the healthcare systems, the ability of healthcare professionals to manage their patients and because the limited resources are so stretched.

NCDs are largely preventable, through proven highly cost-effective interventions.

To date, the focus of funding towards health in developing countries has been on infectious diseases, which includes HIV/AIDs, TB, malaria. Whilst this investment has been a vital one it has been done at the cost of ignoring other significant health concerns of which NCDs are the biggest. It cannot be a question of “either or”. Economic and social development needs substantial improvements in the health of all people which can only come with increased levels of investment.

Developing countries, including those in Africa, simply cannot afford for NCDs to be ignored by governments, policy-makers and development aid agencies.

In closing, let’s together secure adequate funding to scale up low-cost health solutions; placing particular emphasis on prevention, early intervention and health promotion which reaches out to whole communities.

The World Heart Federation, together with The International Diabetes Federation and the International Union Against Cancer call on you to truly acknowledge the growing burden of NCDs, and provide the funding which is so crucial to the future development of low- to middle-income countries, such as those in the Africa region.