

# The case for financing action on noncommunicable diseases – even, and especially, in times of crisis



*Position of the Coalition for Access to NCD Medicines and Products for the Multistakeholder Hearing ahead of the 4th UN High-Level Meeting of the General Assembly on the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases and the Promotion of Mental Health and Wellbeing (NCD HLM4).*

In today's turbulent landscape of constrained budgets and competing priorities, there is a risk that leaders will categorize noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) as too large and difficult to address now, and instinctively think, "this can wait." This reflex, while understandable, is both misguided and a missed opportunity—especially for leaders seeking a guaranteed win for their people, their budget, and their economy.

NCDs—including cardiometabolic conditions like hypertension, stroke, and diabetes; cancers; COPD; and mental health conditions—are the leading cause of early deaths globally, responsible for **3 in every 4 premature deaths**.<sup>1</sup> From a distance, these conditions often have a misleading reputation of being 'slow-moving' or 'long-term' and therefore less urgent, but the reality is starkly different. Just ask anyone whose parent has had a stroke, whose child cannot breathe from an asthma attack, or whose spouse is living with diabetes, how quickly a chronic condition can become a crisis.

Every year, we pay the price of inaction: an average of **USD \$2 trillion** in lost productivity and health care costs, **43 million lives** gone too soon, and an untold debt to all those who lost a loved one to a treatable and preventable fate.<sup>2,3</sup>

**That's right: treatable and preventable. This is one problem that we already have the answers to.** In 80% of cases, we know how to stop people from getting NCDs, and we know how to help people live well with an NCD, rather than suffer or die prematurely.<sup>4</sup> In particular, ensuring everyone can get the safe, effective, and quality medicines and health technologies they need, when and where they need them, and without financial hardship, is critical to avoid costly complications, loss of productivity, and preventable deaths. However, 41% of low-income countries are affected by stockouts. WHO estimates that one-third of the world's population lacks access to essential medicines and diagnostics—a proportion that increases to 50% in the poorest regions. In many countries, these life-saving NCD products come at a heavy out-of-pocket cost, imposing a terrible financial burden on individuals, families, and disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable.<sup>5</sup>

**There is no time to lose. It only takes one disruption for NCDs to overwhelm our health systems and economies.** From pandemics to extreme climate shocks, people with an underlying noncommunicable or mental health condition are often hit first and hardest—driving up emergency room visits, weeks of lost earnings, and tragic losses of life far beyond what the original crisis might have caused on its own. During COVID-19, people living with NCDs made up **60-90%** of people killed by the virus.<sup>6</sup>

**The good news:** since NCDs only get more deadly and expensive if left alone, we can be sure that every step forward or faster will make a positive difference toward saving lives and spending less. In fact, NCD solutions offer a whopping **19:1 return on investment**, and many co-benefits for other areas of health and the environment.<sup>7</sup>

**This September at the NCD HLM4**, leaders have an unprecedented opportunity to remind the world what real courage and strength looks like: not by turning our backs on people at risk for or living with NCDs, but by confronting this solvable challenge head-on, together, to protect our people, economies, and future.

## Three Priorities for NCD Financing Action

Done right, financing action on NCDs can do more than avert deaths and economic loss. It can accelerate progress toward healthier lives, stronger health systems, and more resilient, sustainable communities. This September, we urge leaders to make commitments and take action to **(1) invest more, (2) invest better, and (3) strengthen transparency** in NCD financing:

- [MORE] Increase total resources for health, including by repurposing spending on unhealthy products:** When budgets are tight, a clear place to begin increasing fiscal space for essential health and public goods is to **spend less** on unhealthy products like tobacco, alcohol, and sugar—which all worsen NCDs—and **instead spend more** on making it easier for people to stay healthy and get the care they need.
  - **Reduce government subsidies on fossil fuels and sugar and adopt excise taxes** for unhealthy products like fossil fuels, tobacco, alcohol, and sugar, and set aside the gains for health.
    - *Did you know:* In 2022, the world spent **USD \$7 trillion** on subsidies for fossil fuels that pollute our air, harm our planet, and worsen NCDs.<sup>8</sup> Redirecting 0.25% of that amount—**just 25 cents of every \$100**—would pay for **97% of the most efficient package of NCD interventions in every region of the world**, saving 39 million lives and adding 2.7 trillion to the global economy in 7 years.<sup>9</sup>
  - **Allocate more funds to health, especially to primary health care (PHC)**, to bring good health care within reach for more people. All countries should keep **out-of-pocket health expenses below 20% of national health spending**<sup>10</sup> so that no one is forced to choose between lifesaving NCD medicine and basic living expenses, like food.
- [BETTER] Make the health budget go further through efficient win-win solutions for NCDs and beyond:** To spend less and save lives, we must move faster to diagnose and treat NCDs as early as possible, and remove financial and geographic barriers that delay people from getting the medicines, health products, and care they need.<sup>11</sup>
  - **Strengthen forecasting to improve how we buy and supply essential medicines and products.** We know that better access to essential medicines and vaccines could save 10 million lives per year. But to achieve this, we have to break down barriers that stop us from using

*The Coalition for Access to NCD Medicines & Products (Coalition), launched in 2017, is a multisectoral coalition of governments, nongovernmental organizations, academics, civil society, private sector entities, and foundations that seeks to address gaps in access to affordable NCD medicines and products. The Coalition's mission is to advocate for and provide technical support and tools to strengthen supply security for people living with NCDs, focusing on high-impact implementation programs that enhance supply chains, build health system capacity, and increase financing. The Coalition's vision is for all people living with NCDs in resource-limited settings to have access to affordable basic technologies and medicines (including generics) required for diagnosis and treatment in both public and private service delivery points.*

reliable data to plan ahead. By investing in better data for forecasting and adopting more efficient procurement practices—such as pooled procurement and volume guarantees, where those make sense—we can make supply chains more efficient, transparent, and ready to deliver NCD commodities to those who need them most.

- **Harmonize regulatory requirements to increase availability of NCD medicines and products.** While effective and quality NCD medicines, diagnostics, and products exist, varying regulatory requirements and uncertain timelines can delay or deter product registration—limiting in-country availability of these essential commodities. Advancing regional initiatives to harmonize regulatory (production, prequalification, and trading) mechanisms and including NCD products in national essential medicines and diagnostics lists and drug procurement systems can alleviate market entry barriers, enabling more NCD medicines and products to be registered, thus driving greater supply and affordability.
- **Make NCD medicines and products more affordable with better pricing policies.** This means exploring mark-up regulations across the supply chain, from manufacturer to patient; facilitating financial protections for the most vulnerable; and using better data to prioritize products that offer the greatest value for money.
- **Ensure everyone can access NCD screening, diagnosis, and treatment in their community by integrating these services into PHC.** Integrate early NCD screening, diagnosis, and treatment into facility and community PHC entry points. By giving people more choices of where, when, and how to get the NCD care and treatment they want and need, countries can increase use of these cost-effective services while preventing costly and deadly NCD morbidities.<sup>12</sup>
- **Safeguard availability of medicines, diagnostics, and health products at the last mile.** Ensure that PHC service delivery points are never left empty handed. Prioritize innovations such as decentralized pick-up locations, community delivery through patient associations and community health workers, cost-effective bundling

solutions (like Diabetes CarePak), and multi-month dispensing.

- **Prioritize a PHC approach** in all policies to ensure that every child grows up in a community that promotes good health and has regular touchpoints with trusted health workers from their earliest days, reducing the estimated 70% of NCDs that can be traced back to risk factors in childhood and adolescence.

### 3. [TRANSPARENT] Track and show the flow of NCD spending, from budget to real-world benefit:

- Improve local NCD data quality to drive evidence-based resource allocation at national level and more responsive decision-making and care at the local level.
- Transparently report on how tax revenue from unhealthy products is reinvested in health and public goods.

Across all actions, partnership across sectors is key to preventing NCD complications and deaths through greater access to affordable NCD medicines and technologies. As a multisectoral coalition, we have seen the benefits first-hand: greater understanding of NCDs, their many determinants, and the implications for all stakeholders; more innovative and accelerated policy change and programming; and better data, knowledge sharing and collaboration to strengthen all efforts.

### Conclusion

Good health is a precondition for economic and social stability, whether you are looking at a single family, a community, or a nation.

No matter what crisis is around the corner, delaying action on a solvable challenge like NCDs is a risk that people and economies simply cannot afford.

We need to: **1) invest more; 2) invest better; and 3) strengthen transparency in NCD financing** to bring the threat of NCDs under control—not in spite of these challenging times, but because of them.

<sup>1</sup> World Health Organization. Noncommunicable diseases. 23 Dec 2023. Available from: <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/noncommunicable-diseases>

<sup>2</sup> NCD Alliance. Financing NCDs. Available from: <https://ncdalliance.org/why-ncds/financing-ncds>

<sup>3</sup> World Health Organization. Noncommunicable diseases (NCD) mortality data. Available from: <https://www.who.int/data/gho/data/themes/topics/topic-details/GHO/ncd-mortality>

<sup>4</sup> NCD Alliance. Why noncommunicable diseases (NCDs)? Available from: <https://ncdalliance.org/why-ncds/NCDs>

<sup>5</sup> World Health Organization. Assessing national capacity for the prevention and control of noncommunicable diseases: Report of the 2021 global survey. Available from: <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240071698>

<sup>6</sup> NCD Alliance. Why noncommunicable diseases (NCDs)? Available from: <https://ncdalliance.org/why-ncds/NCDs> <https://ncdalliance.org/why-ncds/financing-ncds>

<sup>7</sup> NCD Alliance. Financing NCDs. Available from: <https://ncdalliance.org/why-ncds/financing-ncds>

<sup>8</sup> International Monetary Fund. Energy subsidies. Available from: <https://www.imf.org/en/Topics/climate-change/energy-subsidies>

<sup>9</sup> NCD Countdown 2030: efficient pathways and strategic investments to accelerate progress towards the Sustainable Development Goal target 3.4 in low-income and middle-income countries. Watkins, David A. et al. *The Lancet*, Volume 399, Issue 10331, 1266 - 1278. Available from: [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(21\)02347-3/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(21)02347-3/fulltext)

<sup>10</sup> NCD Alliance. Financing solutions for NCDs and mental health, Page 9. Available from: [https://ncdalliance.org/sites/default/files/resource\\_files/Financing-Solutions-for-NCDs-and-MH%20brief\\_final\\_0.pdf](https://ncdalliance.org/sites/default/files/resource_files/Financing-Solutions-for-NCDs-and-MH%20brief_final_0.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> World Bank. Unlocking the Power of Healthy Longevity: Demographic Change, Non-communicable Diseases, and Human Capital. 12 September 2024. Available from: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/health/publication/unlocking-power-healthy-longevity>

<sup>12</sup> UNICEF. Noncommunicable diseases: a child health issue. Available from: <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-health/noncommunicable-diseases/>