

NCDs at the 73rd World Health Assembly: Learning lessons from COVID-19

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The 73rd World Health Assembly (WHA73) was convened on 18th and 19th May 2020. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, WHA73 was hosted as a virtual meeting for the first time ever and with an abridged agenda, focusing on the pandemic response. The assembled Ministers adopted one [Resolution](#) [1], co-sponsored by over 140 governments and led by the European Union, outlining the COVID-19 response.

The Resolution recognizes the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on people living with pre-existing conditions, including NCDs as well as HIV/AIDs, TB and disabilities, as well as older people and health workers. It calls on governments to develop national COVID-19 action plans and specifically to maintain uninterrupted and safe provision of health services for NCDs, as well as mental health, mother and child health and sexual and reproductive health and to promote improved nutrition for women and children.

The Resolution on the COVID-19 response also recognizes that the pandemic “disproportionately affects the poor and the most vulnerable people, with repercussions on health and development gains, in particular in low- and middle-income and developing countries, thus hampering the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Universal Health Coverage (UHC) including through the strengthening of Primary Health Care”. The Resolution also considers potential further negative impacts triggered by the pandemic, including malnutrition, impacts on women, children, and frontline health workers, as well as disruptions in care.

In his [opening address](#) [2], WHO Director General Dr Tedros warned, “The disruption to health systems threatens to unwind decades of progress against maternal and child mortality, HIV, malaria, tuberculosis, noncommunicable diseases, mental health, polio and many other of the most urgent health threats.” He called on governments to strengthen, implement and finance health systems and organizations, including WHO. Dr Tedros particularly noted that, “COVID-19 is not just a global health emergency, it is a vivid demonstration of the fact that there is no health security without resilient health systems, or without addressing the social, economic, commercial and environmental determinants of health.”

WHA73 was addressed by fourteen Heads of State and Government, in the opening and closing sessions,

demonstrating support for the WHO, at a time of unprecedented attention and pressure. Several Heads of State, as well as Ministers from all WHO regions, made specific mention of NCDs and/or mental health, in relation to the COVID-19 response:

Prime Minister of Barbados and Chair of the Conference of Heads of Government of Caricom, Hon. Mia Mottley, highlighted NCDs in [her impassioned speech](#) [3]: "Even with the pandemic we must not drop the ball on those other global health priorities that are critical to our overall development. I refer specifically to the chronic NCDs – the silent killers - diabetes and cardiovascular disease, hypertension... For our populations, these challenges remain real and continue to present a silent but real and present danger."

The Secretary of State for Health from Mexico, Dr. Jorge Alcocer Varela, was among many to convey a wish to learn from the crisis to build back better: "We must not ignore worse pandemics than the virus itself, such as overweight, obesity, diabetes and high blood pressure... We cannot and we should not return to normal. We have to turn everything around and there has never been a better time in history to strengthen our efforts in order to ensure better nutrition and to include environmental health as an indivisible determinant of for human health and to include it permanently in our agendas as part of the Sustainable Development agenda."

Whilst the Resolution was adopted unanimously, the [USA released a statement](#) [4] disassociating from paragraphs referring to sexual and reproductive health and rights, and equitable access and fair distribution of vaccines and treatments for COVID-19 once available, including via voluntary patent pooling. WHO, Costa Rica and Chile have announced that a voluntary intellectual property pool for COVID-19 related technologies will be officially launched in late May 2020, building on the [Medicines Patent Pool](#) [5] model.

Many NCD civil society organisations submitted written statements to WHA73, including UICC, WCRFi (both supported by NCD Alliance), ADI, ESMO, FDI, the Fred Hollows Foundation, ISN, Movendi International, the Union, World Obesity Federation, WHF and the Global Coalition on Circulatory Health. In addition, NCD Alliance released a [reaction statement](#) [6] and also supports the [statement of the WHO Civil Society Working Group](#) [7] on NCDs.

WHA73 will reconvene in late 2020, to discuss [outstanding agenda items](#) [8] as approved by the Executive Board. The Assembly approved a written silence procedure for approval of Resolutions and Decisions, expected to include a [Resolution on Cervical Cancer Prevention](#) [9] and a [Resolution on Eye Health](#) [10]. If no objections are raised during the silence period, the Resolutions would be considered approved without further need for discussion.

Please see the WHO [WHA73](#) [11] site for all documents, the recording of the session, [statements delivered by Member States](#) [12] and [submitted by non-state actors](#) [13].

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