

FOCUS ON NON-COMMUNICABLE DISEASES (NCD's) BY THE 2011 UN SUMMIT IS A TIMELY AND WELCOME MOVE

BY

Healthy Active Kids Kenya

and KIDS-CAN

It is true. The global burden of disease is shifting from infectious diseases (communicable) to non-communicable diseases (NCD's). This trend is resulting in a rapid increase in chronic conditions such as heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure, osteoarthritis and cancer. This burden of disease is increasing rapidly, especially in developing countries, and is likely to cause major public health and economic crises in the near future. Kenya is not spared in this pandemic. Kenya like many developing countries is currently facing a rapid epidemiological transition as a result of technological advancements that are changing lifestyle behaviours. The transition is implicated in the creation of an "obesogenic" environment that encourages overconsumption of energy-dense foods coupled with a sedentary lifestyle and engagement in insufficient amounts of physical activity. Consequently, overweight, obesity and associated comorbidities are likely to be on the increase in Kenya and other developing countries. This lifestyle transition is imposing the double burden of infectious (communicable) and NCDs in an environment and economy incapable of dealing with the ensuing disease burden. The World Health Organization (WHO) predicts that by the year 2020, NCD's will be causing seven out of every 10 deaths in developing countries.

Most NCD's share the same risk factors; tobacco smoking, a diet high in saturated fat and low in fruit and vegetables, alcohol consumption and physical inactivity. This tendency is concentrated in urban areas in developing countries and is manifested from various facets of globalization. Despite strong evidence of the arrival and consequences of the physical activity and nutrition transition in developing countries like Kenya, the action from policy-makers, international aid agencies, industry and academics to date has been almost absent. Increased attention and investment by all sectors is required for the prevention of NCDs and further research is needed in this area.

Kenyan's are admired globally as being active and fit, producing a disproportionate number of elite endurance athletes. The emerging physical activity and nutrition transition in Kenya is therefore likely to lead to a less active lifestyle, eroding our athletic prowess and national identity. It is critical from a cultural, economic and public health perspective to encourage, promote and facilitate a healthy active lifestyle across all populations. Further, it is important to begin to monitor physical activity patterns and fitness levels among Kenyans so as to initiate necessary interventions and monitor trends. Education, advocacy and awareness campaigns are also important if this war against NCDs is to be won. Kenya's vision 2030 will only be realized if we put concerted efforts towards addressing the public health problem caused by NCD's.

To this end, Kenyatta University in collaboration with Canadian researchers have formed a research alliance aimed at addressing the problem of physical inactivity. The research alliance is called the Kenyan International Development Study- Canadian Activity Needs (KIDS-CAN) Research Alliance (<http://www.haloresearch.ca/kids-can-research-alliance/>). The objectives of the KIDS-CAN Research Alliance are to:

1. Promote and facilitate research in the determinants and predictors of childhood obesity.
2. Promote collaborative action to support developing countries in addressing the challenges of NCD's.

3. Exploit the timing of the current childhood obesity crisis in Canada, the nutrition and Physical Activity transition in Kenya.
4. Develop and foster a long-term international partnership and research alliance aimed at addressing the problem of obesity, overweight and sedentary behavior.

In more concerted efforts to address the problems related to physical inactivity and sedentary lifestyle, Healthy Active Kids Kenya(HAKK) has been established. This is an organization that advocates, promotes and encourages Kenyans to be physically active and eat healthy foods as a way of addressing the problem of NCD.

The fact that the UN General Assembly has decided to hold a UN Summit on the prevention of NCDs is a welcome and a step in the right direction. The Summit focussed on the four most prominent NCDs, namely, cancers, cardiovascular diseases, chronic respiratory diseases and diabetes with the aim of agreeing on a global strategy to address NCDs. It is hoped that Kenya and indeed other developing countries shall be able to take necessary steps in order to address the problems associated with the current nutrition and physical activity transition before it is too late.

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