

Better Health, Better Lives

Combating Non-Communicable Diseases
in the Context of Norwegian Development Policy (2020-2024)

Summary



Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Norwegian Ministry of Health and Care Services

Background: Changing Trends in Global Health

Global public health has changed significantly since the start of the millennium. There has been a substantial reduction in the percentage of people who die from communicable diseases such as tuberculosis, polio, AIDS and malaria, in part due to successful vaccination and treatment programmes as well as other measures. The same is true of child mortality. Today, non-communicable diseases are the biggest killers worldwide, with the most prevalent being cardiovascular diseases, cancer, respiratory diseases, diabetes and mental disorders. This also applies to those aged under 70, which is defined as premature death.

In recent years, we have seen a strong upward trend in the number of deaths from non-communicable diseases (NCDs) in low-income countries. In Africa, the proportion of NCD deaths, as compared to total deaths, is expected to increase from around 35% today to over 50% by 2030. Certain risk factors increase the likelihood of developing these diseases: tobacco, harmful use of alcohol, unhealthy diets, insufficient physical activity and air pollution. Tobacco and air pollution are the two risk factors that cause the highest number of deaths.

The Norwegian Government wishes to contribute to the battle against non-communicable diseases in low-income countries. This work will be included in health related development cooperation and will help achieve several of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The strategy sets out a plan for this work for the period 2020 to 2024. This strategy positions Norway to play a leading role in expanding work on NCDs in international development and health policy as well as ensuring practical action in low-income countries. The Norwegian initiative will focus on the following three main areas:

i. Preventing and reducing risk through concrete measures across sectors to prevent disease and premature death, where regulation, taxation and multi-sectoral measures will be important. The initiative will target risk factors, focusing on children and young people.

- ii. Strengthening primary health care by improving prevention, diagnosis and treatment of non-communicable diseases, and ensuring everyone has access to health care subsidised by the public authorities.
- iii. Strengthening global public goods, including normative work, access to health data and health information, digitalisation and research.

The strategy is based on the important principles that underpin the SDGs and our development policy. This means that the poorest and most vulnerable will be reached – no one will be left behind – and that everyone is entitled to good health.



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The strategy comprises measures within most of the priority focus areas in Norwegian development policy, with emphasis on health, education, sustainable food systems, climate and environment, renewable energy, humanitarian work, people with disabilities, digitalisation and good governance.

The strategy builds on experience from Norwegian public health work where everyone has access to health services, and from aid and development cooperation. It focuses on low-income countries in particular, and advocates an approach that helps to achieve the SDGs and to implement the World Health Organization's (WHO) global action plan for the prevention and control of non-communicable diseases. As well as having consequences for the individual, non-communicable diseases also negatively affect a country's economic

development. It is particularly important to prioritise actions in a manner that protects people from health threats and ensures fair and equal access to health services based on universal health coverage. This will result in the greatest health benefit. This is in line with the declaration on universal health coverage adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2019.

There is global consensus on the measures needed to prevent and control non-communicable diseases and to reverse the negative trend. We need to fight NCDs and turn a global crisis into a success story. Norway wishes to contribute to this goal, and to save millions of lives, ensure people enjoy better health throughout their lives and encourage positive economic development in low-income countries.



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The Battle against Non-communicable Diseases in Low-Income Countries – Norway's Contribution

Norway will be a global driver in the battle against non-communicable diseases in low-income countries. Our vision is a world where as few people as possible die as a result of these diseases before they reach the age of 70.

The non-communicable diseases we refer to in this strategy are based on the 5 x 5 NCD Agenda adopted by the UN. It covers five diseases: cardiovascular diseases, cancer, respiratory diseases, diabetes and mental health disorders, and the five risk factors; tobacco, air pollution, harmful use of alcohol, unhealthy diets and insufficient physical activity.

Non-communicable diseases lead to premature death and reduce quality of life, and they can also have major economic consequences for the individual and their family. These diseases often have a chronic course entailing long-term and expensive treatment. The cost to society is very high, both as a result of the high cost of treatment and care in the health services, and the fact that many people die at a productive age.

The strategy is based on WHO's Best Buys and other recommendations to prevent and control non-communicable diseases, in line with SDG 3 Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages. If fully implemented, it will contribute to a healthier population and support economic growth in low-income countries.ⁱⁱ The implementation of the 16 Best Buys could help to save 8 million lives a year by 2030. Furthermore, the Best Buys could also lead to overall savings of 7 trillion USD in low- and middle- income countries over the next 15 years, which is three times Africa's total GDP.

A large-scale global effort to combat NCDs would thus save millions of lives, help ensure a healthier population and support economic growth in low-income countries. This will be crucial to achieving several of the SDGs, and not just the health-related goals.

The strategy includes efforts to strengthen primary health care and measures to prevent these diseases by reducing risks, and measures to improve global public goods. Emphasis is placed on efforts targeting the risk factors that cause the most diseases and deaths in low-income countries.



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Key Norwegian Strategic Commitments

Norway will:

- **Help to prevent non-communicable diseases** through development cooperation by contributing to healthy and sustainably produced food, a healthy environment with clean air and consumption of clean energy, opportunities for physical activity, access to high-quality education and stronger tobacco and alcohol regulations. Emphasis shall be given to social sustainability and reducing health differences from childhood to old age.
- **Strengthen the implementation** of WHO's *Global Action Plan for the Prevention and Control of Non-communicable Diseases* in low-income countries, and help to implement the UN resolutions on non-communicable diseases adopted at the UN High-Level meetings in 2011, 2014 and 2018.
- **Act as a global driver and cooperate with relevant actors** in well-coordinated efforts to combat non-communicable diseases.
- **Help to strengthen implementation of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC)**ⁱ in low-income countries, in particular implementation of health-related tobacco taxes. Support the SAFER initiative on alcohol control, which helps countries to reduce harmful use of alcohol and related health, social and economic consequencesⁱⁱ.
- **Support the work on taxation and regulation of products that are harmful to health** such as tobacco and alcohol, and reduce polluting emissions in low and middle income countries. Support countries requesting assistance to tax products that are harmful to health as well as air pollution emissions. Work through the Norwegian Tax for Development (*Skatt for utvikling*) programme will be important in this context.
- **Strengthen efforts to ensure healthy nutrition** in line with WHO's advice on healthy dietsⁱⁱⁱ, including reducing salt, sugar, saturated fat and trans fat. Promote breast-feeding and measures to improve mothers' nutrition before and during pregnancy, to ensure healthy growth and lifelong health benefits. Work to improve children and young people's knowledge of health, diet and physical activity, and ensure good access to healthy food and activity at school, in cooperation with relevant multilateral actors.
- **Strengthen efforts to reduce the number of deaths caused by air pollution**, in line with SDG target 3.9. We will work to support global commitments and effective measures to prevent harmful air quality, in cooperation with WHO and other relevant organisations, forums and countries. We will encourage more countries to take part in the *BreatheLife* campaign^{iv} and endorse WHO's initiative to improve air quality by 2030, in line with its Air Quality Guidelines. We will also promote pollution-free cooking through the initiative 'Renewable energy in Norwegian Development Policy'^v.
- **Support the work on achieving SDG target 3.8 on Universal Health Coverage**, and draw attention to primary health care as being the best way a country can provide health services to its entire population, irrespective of income level, including the poorest and most vulnerable groups. This entails the inclusion of the most cost-effective measures to combat non-communicable diseases in the primary health service, with emphasis on prevention and diagnosis, as well as treatment of the most common non-communicable diseases and reducing risk with respect to:
 - The prevention of cervical cancer, including through HPV vaccination;
 - Diagnosis and treatment of high blood pressure;
 - Advice on diet and nutrition, including breast-feeding, and on mental health, the importance of physical activity and the harmful effects of tobacco, alcohol and air pollution.

- **Support efforts in the field of mental health**, including through helping to implement measures included in WHO's Mental Health Action Plan^{vii}, and efforts to ensure that mental health becomes an integral part of the prevention and treatment offered by the primary health service and education sector as a platform for prevention from early childhood. Cooperation with WHO, authorities and national and local civil society organisations will be important in this context.
- **Through board representation and budget allocations, ensure that organisations such as the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria and Gavi, The Vaccine Alliance** also contribute to the work to achieve universal health coverage, through their involvement in low-income countries, and thus help combat non-communicable diseases.
- **Strengthen efforts in digital health** as part of the follow-up of the strategy for the digitalisation of development policy^{vii}, including continuing to help improve the quality of health data and health data registers at country level and develop digital health information systems in low-income countries, in cooperation with the University of Oslo and the Norwegian Institute of Public Health, among others. Contribute to the global knowledge base on combatting non-communicable diseases through relevant research programmes and cooperation between institutions.
- **Support efforts to improve access to medical equipment and medication** in areas hit by crises and conflict in order to prevent/treat non-communicable diseases.
- **Strengthen efforts to prevent non-communicable diseases by focusing on education in development policy**, through, among other things, health-promotion and preventive health services at school.

Norway's Development Policy Guidelines

The strategy is based on the important goals and principles that underpin our foreign and development policy. The main goal of the initiative is to help combat poverty and promote economic development and welfare in low-income countries. The initiative will be designed to ensure that we reach the poorest and most vulnerable groups, and help us achieve the main objective of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda – that *no one is left behind*. As a basis for the initiative, countries must prioritise non-communicable disease actions in national policy. Countries are also expected to develop a plan for this work to the extent such a plan does not already exist, including how to increase financial investments in national health services.

Health is a priority area in Norwegian foreign and development policy. Norway has a leading role in global health. The goal of Norway's international health cooperation is to prevent and effectively combat disease and to help achieve SDG 3 on health. The 2030 Agenda requires us to work across sectors; coordinated efforts in sectors that affect public health are particularly important. WHO recommends a *Health in All Policies* approach. This strategy therefore comprises measures within most of the priority areas in Norwegian development policy – health, education, sustainable food systems, climate and environment, renewable energy, humanitarian work, people with disabilities, digitalisation and good governance.

REFERENCES

- WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC): <https://www.who.int/fctc/en/>
- SAFER – WHO's initiative on alcohol control: https://www.who.int/substance_abuse/safer/en/
- WHO Fact sheet on healthy diets: <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/healthy-diet>
- The BreatheLife campaign on air pollution, which is led by the Climate and Clean Air Coalition, WHO, the UN Environment Programme and the World Bank: www.BreatheLife2030.com
- Clean Energy for Development: <https://norad.no/en/front/thematic-areas/energy/clean-energy/>
- Mental Health Action Plan 2013-2020. World Health Organization: https://www.who.int/mental_health/action_plan_2013/en/
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