UN Interagency Task Force on NCDs supports Oman to tackle noncommunicable diseases

12 April 2016: The United Nations Interagency Task Force on the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases (NCDs) carried out a joint mission to Oman from 10 to 12 April 2016 to support the Government of Oman in their efforts to tackle NCDs.

The Joint Mission found that NCDs - principally cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, cancers, chronic respiratory diseases cause 68% of all deaths in the Sultanate of Oman and the probability of dying prematurely from one of these diseases is 18%. This means that nearly one of every five adult dies from NCDs before they should.

Globally, the key risk factors for NCDs are tobacco use, unhealthy diet, physical inactivity and the harmful use of alcohol. The Joint Mission learned that despite recent progress in addressing NCDs and their risk factors the large majority of Omani adults have insufficient intake of fruits and vegetables, that 40% are physically inactive and one in seven Omani men use tobacco. In addition, over one half of Omani men and women are overweight or obese. More than 40% of adult Omanis have hypertension and 12% have been diagnosed with diabetes.

The Joint Mission included representatives from the following agencies: Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and all three levels of the World Health Organization (WHO), which led the mission.

Oman committed to fight noncommunicable diseases

“I invited the UN Task Force to Oman because I am absolutely committed to preventing premature deaths from NCDs in our country. The epidemic of NCDs requires government, academia, NGOs and the private sector to work together”, said Dr. Ahmed Mohammed Al-Saidi, Minister of Health of Oman. “We simply cannot afford the costs of people becoming ill from NCDs at a young age. The support of the UN is crucial as we move ahead”, he added.

As the first high income country to receive a Task Force mission, the Joint Mission has been able to learn from some innovative practice in Oman in order to share these experiences throughout the region and beyond. The mission welcomed the leadership of government in responding to NCDs, highlighting the National NCD Policy, the draft action plan and the National Multisectoral NCD Committee.

Scaling up action

“The United Nations is committed to support Oman in further scaling up action to tackle NCDs. The levels of NCDs in Oman are very worrying and we are impressed that the government is taking this issue so seriously. We have seen a number of initiatives to tackle NCDs, including the way that government is
working with bakeries to make their products more healthy,” - Dr Oleg Chestnov, Assistant Director-General for Noncommunicable Diseases and Mental Health, World Health Organization, who led the UN Task Force Mission in Oman. “We discussed the most effective interventions for tackling NCDs with the government, for example raising taxes on tobacco products and foods that are high in salt, sugar and some fats. These are highly cost effective and feasible to undertake. If implemented they can result in dramatic reductions in NCDs over a fairly short period of time. The government is well placed to deliver on its long term plans and vision for NCDs.”, Dr Chestnov added.

Mr Osama Makkawi, UNICEF Representative in Oman said: “Tackling non communicable diseases is critical as it will support the children of Oman in reaching their full potential and living in a disease free environment. UNICEF is committed to supporting the Government in this area as a national development priority.”

UNDP Policy Specialist Dudley Tarlton noted, “the UN agencies resident in Oman have committed to strengthening their own action and coordination to help the country respond to NCDs beyond the health sector. And through the UN Interagency Task Force on NCDs, organizations like UNDP who are not in Oman can contribute to this effort.”

Optimistic future

The Mission met with HH Sayyid Fahad, Deputy Prime Minister of Oman, and the Council of Ministers as well as senior officials from Supreme Council of Planning as well as ministries including health, commerce, education, agriculture, sports and municipalities. The Mission also met with the Parliament of Oman (Majlis Daula and Majlis Shura), as well as representatives of civil society organizations, and professional and academic associations. The mission will be making a series of recommendations following the Joint Mission in order to generate an even more effective national NCD response.

The mission is optimistic that Oman can rise to the challenge of reducing premature mortality for NCDs. The recently 2015 WHO NCD Progress Monitor, scored countries against 18 specific targets on national NCD planning, surveillance, as well as policies in place for the prevention and management of NCD. According to the report, Oman had fully met 6 of these 18 targets and the Joint Mission believes that by 2018, when countries report on their progress at the UN General Assembly, more of these targets can be fully achieved.

Notes

1. According to a 2014 WHO publication, the probability of dying between ages 30 and 70 years from the 4 main NCDs is 18%. Thirty three percent of all deaths are from cardiovascular diseases such as heart attacks and strokes. Cancers and diabetes are responsible for 10% of all deaths each.

2. WHO estimates that 14.7% of men are tobacco smokers. One quarter of Omani adults are obese.

3. NCDs are now a central part to the international development agenda since UN General Assembly agreed the Sustainable Development Goals in New York in 2015. The UN and WHO has a set of blueprints for action which, if implemented, will reduce premature mortality for NCDs in all

1 NCD Progress Monitor 2015 (page 107). WHO. http://www.who.int/nmh/publications/ncd-progress-monitor-2015/en/. 16 countries in the world have fully achieved 8 indicators. They include Denmark, Finland, Germany and Latvia.

4. The United Nations Interagency Task Force on the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases was established by the UN Secretary General in 2013 at the request of ECOSOC to provide technical support to Governments in tackling NCDs. The Task Force conducts missions to countries throughout the world and Oman is the second country that has received a mission in Eastern Mediterranean.

5. The mission noted establishment of a national team to monitor implementation of the salt and fat reduction. In 2015, 10% reduction of salt content in bread items was achieved in the main bakeries; further reduction is planned in 2016. Currently, a situation analysis of salt content in cheese is in process. Gathering of information of available Omani companies to target SFA and TFA is also being done.

6. The mission welcomed the development of GCC standard on trans fatty acids in 2015 and the implementation of the standard of trans fatty acids. The proposal for reduction of saturated fat especially Palm oil has been sent to the higher authorities for discussion.

7. The mission also welcomed the proposal for increasing tax on sugary beverages which is under consideration.

8. The joint mission also highlighted the importance of nutrition, highlighting especially worrying levels of obesity. Urgent action is required to improve the proportion of the population eating a healthy diet.

9. The Mission highlighted the need for the Resident UN agencies to work together to scale up coordinated support to the Government of Oman through a dedicated working group (and probably an agreement with the Government) on NCDs.

10. Oman will report to the Third High-level Meeting on NCDs in 2018. In particular it will be invited to provide data for WHO to report on progress on a set of time bound commitments set out in the Second High-level Meeting that was held in 2014 as well as on the 18 specific targets on national NCD planning, surveillance, as well as policies in place for the prevention and management of NCD.²

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