Ladies and gentlemen, dear chair, distinguished colleagues, panellists, thank you for the word. My name is Jan Peloza and I am representing a Youth Network from Slovenia (a small country in Central Europe) called No Excuse Slovenia. I however wear different hats today and eventhough I might not look that young anymore to fit in the wide definition of youth (I will be 33 in a couple of months), this year marks 18 years of my commitment to youth engagement locally, nationally and internationally. Apart from being a co-founder No Excuse Slovenia, which grew up to be the biggest NCD prevention NGO in Slovenia, currently employing 16 people and with over 50 volunteers, I have actively participated in developing and sustaining different civil-society grass-root level international groups, namely the Alcohol Policy Youth Network, European Environmental and Health Youth Coalition, the Tobacco Control Youth Network and a number regionally based youth-led and youth-serving organizations. It is important to note that I am currently also concluding my mandate as an alternate board member for the Adolescents Youth Constituency of the WHO Partnership for Maternal, New-born and Child Health (PMNCH).

When seeing for the first time the Zero draft document of the HLM on NCDs I was particularly happy to notice the first paragraph ambitiously stating “TIME TO DELIVER”. Additionally, I really like the wording in bold stating that we should accelerate our response to address NCDs for the health and well-being of present and future generations. Unfortunately, my happiness didn’t last long. As a European citizen and a citizen of the world, I just cannot accept that a landmark document for our common fight against NCDs does not mention with a single sentence or word meaningful engagement of young people as important if not the key stakeholders in acting on the future challenges this agenda brings. WHO ARE THE FUTURE GENERATIONS IF NOT THEM?

I wanted to start my intervention with this powerful message not only because it sounds well now, but mainly because it will not sound well when we will be coming to a point when
financial resources will be there, political will is going to be present, but no people will be able to carry the heavy burden of work to be achieved to win one of the biggest battles of our generation. As a youth worker I can say that young people have in majority of the cases been presented as a challenge or a problem, someone who we need to ACT FOR and not to ACT WITH to leave a better world for. Seldomly we were portrayed as a solution. Why I said seldomly and not hardly ever, as you guessed, there are some positive examples also in the UN fora. Here I am pleased to congratulate the honourable Graca Machel, who was chairing the before mentioned PMNCH until recent and have put active youth engagement in the focus of this WHO administered partnership. Now young people in this partnership have the same (2) votes in the Board meetings as UN agencies, private companies, governments, international organizations, funders and others. And we talk about organized young people, who were given the responsibility, been listened to and been included in the democratic process practically from the cradle on. This kind of leadership is needed! And this is what for now, the HLM outcome document lacks.

But mainly I am here today to talk about accountability from governments towards its citizens. As mentioned, I am coming from Slovenia who is lucky enough to be exempted from major conflicts in the 20th century and being part of an ex-Yugoslavia for a long time, we have been learning a lot since our independence in the 90s. We were learning how to work with civil society, private companies, how to build a sustainable health-care and health-prevention system, but mainly were trying to create strong bonds between sectors, ministries and other key players in order to advance certain issues faster. I am not sure this will sound right, but as a civil society representative I don’t believe we have succeeded. Let me give you an example – major health policies in Slovenia are as elsewhere mainly being stopped or reduced in value by various chambers of commerce, lobby interest groups or even worse – by parts of the governments itself. As this is quite a familiar story to my European colleagues, usually the Ministries of Finance have diametrically opposite evidence than us when it comes to tobacco, alcohol or sugar taxation and the Ministry of Economy believes that the public health system is more a financial burden than an asset. Public health is a cross-sectoral issue and not just a health-ministry based issue.
To add oil to the fire (as we say in Slovenia), most important best buys (like promotion, pricing and accessibility) are not controlled by the Health Ministry when it comes to health. A clear example is that the Market inspectorate in Slovenia is controlling the sale of tobacco and alcohol to the underage and according to their data, between 2006 and 2012 there was none or very little violation of the Tobacco or Alcohol Act banning the sale of this commodities to young people. Therefore, in their point of view action was not needed and any further progress in these two health areas wasn’t a priority. **And this was the official governmental position for quite some time.** If there wouldn’t be for organized young people after 2012 who with the help of well-established pro-public health institutions carried out studies about this phenomenon, we would never know that the law is written in a way to mainly help prosper enterprises to boost their sales **and not the population who is developing NCDs** as a result. In this case young people proved that in 92 percent of the cases alcohol can be bought by underage young people, while in the case of tobacco this grew up to over 95 percent. As a direct result, the Slovenian Tobacco Act was adopted in 2017 to become one of the most progressive in the world (following Australia, UK and France), taking in consideration findings provided by organized young people and making it a fundament for future action. **Unfortunately, we are not there yet on other areas affecting NCDs.**

So, what should the governments do and what is young people role in the NCD response?

**FIRST:** Governments should support initiatives that are aiming at holding ministries, governments and politicians accountable and not seeing it as a threat. Nowadays in Central and South Eastern Europe at least, we have to unfortunately hide our advocacy plans mainly in our prevention activities in order to receive public funding support.

**SECOND:** Governmental representatives should disclose interaction and in general avoid meetings with economic operators (namely the tobacco, alcohol and food industry and their front groups), especially when it comes to public health topics and public policy. There is a way for the food and non-alcohol beverages industry to work with the governments, **but trying to turn down evidence-based policies reducing visibility, raising price of salty, sweet and fat products and accessibility to children IS NOT one of them.** The alcohol and tobacco industry should be completely excluded from any governmental negotiations whatsoever as they have a proven long track record of abusing this chance for buying time and not
delivering what they promise (the last example is the EU self-regulation fiasco about alcohol labelling)

**And THIRD (and last):** In order for young people to be able to join, they have to have capacity, competence and knowledge and this does not happen overnight. Only organized and well-funded evidence-based interventions and trainings for young people will lead to the point that youth as future leaders will get the entire picture. The picture they get now through social media is heavily lubricated by the before mentioned industries. **Building capacity and involvement of young people in decision-making is therefore the key.**

**Ladies and gentlemen, to conclude:** I would like to call on advocates, interest groups, member states and especially the UNGA to adopt a **strong document that is as clear and as legally binding as possible.** In order to achieve the ambitious 2030 agenda, we will have to count on much more than just grass-root organizations’ capacity to advocate and mention the obvious. **We need to build a new generation of responsible and well-informed young leaders who will carry our message of (HASHTAG) #BeatNCDs in all their future actions – be it on NCDs or else. And this will not happen by itself.**

Thank you.