Mr Chairman, honourable prime-ministers, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

I am aware that I am standing before heads of government and other leaders responsible for furthering socio-economic development in the Caribbean.

This is the first time in history that such an enlightened group of heads of government have collectively committed to stem the tide of chronic diseases in their countries, as these diseases seriously undermine economic growth and well-being across society, and perpetuate chronic poverty at household level.

There is now an increasing amount of evidence that chronic diseases and poverty are interconnected in a vicious circle. With regards to tobacco-related noncommunicable diseases, this interconnection is clearly established. This has an important implication, as it means that poverty reduction strategies have to go hand-in-hand with policies to prevent chronic diseases. This Summit clearly highlights your determination to adopt development strategies that encompass the current and alarming health situation due to noncommunicable diseases in the region.
Honourable prime-ministers,

WHO forecasts that over the next 10 years, premature death from cancer, diabetes, heart disease and chronic respiratory diseases will increase by 17% around the world. The World Bank projects that in low-income countries, chronic diseases will overtake communicable diseases as the leading cause of death by 2015. In many countries this is already the case. Yet, as many countries continue to battle against infectious diseases, few developing countries have started to address chronic diseases. What we are witnessing today is how the Caribbean is bringing stewardship to the rest of the world.

I am aware of the heavy responsibility on your shoulders to translate this commitment into action. Fortunately, chronic diseases are largely caused by a small number of shared risk factors: improper diet, inadequate physical activity, tobacco use, and harmful alcohol consumption. Faced with increasing trends, the best strategy is to formulate and implement national responses that balance population-wide prevention with individual-based interventions to change behaviour and health outcomes on a massive scale. The challenge is to make healthy choices the easy choices. Countries which have implemented comprehensive strategies have been successful.

As an international community, we have made some great strides forward. To support prevention, we have a powerful international instrument. The WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC) has become one of the most widely embraced treaties in the history of the United Nations. I encourage countries which have not yet ratified the WHO FCTC to do so and all countries to implement the legal provisions of the treaty to curb the epidemic of noncommunicable diseases. This is preventive medicine, on a global scale, at its best. And Member States of WHO have also adopted a Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health. We have many reasons to be optimistic as we have solutions and we know they work.
You also have my full admiration. Your experiences are diverse and you exchange them freely, to good effect. You demonstrated four golden assets. I am referring to your existing capacity to plan national responses to stem the tide of chronic diseases, your capacity to implement national responses, your networks and alliances to support national responses, and your drive for accountability to demonstrate progress. It is not surprising that this region has pioneered a first summit of heads of government on chronic diseases.

On behalf of WHO, we pledge to work to support the implementation of the Summit Declaration in partnership with PAHO and your regional and national institutions to bring to bear the evidence and solutions from other countries.

You initiated an unprecedented momentum. The tremendous progress in the Caribbean will be included in a global action plan for the prevention and control of chronic diseases, which is under preparation at WHO. Your efforts are lessons in how to stretch resources so that benefits reach the largest possible number of people, and these need to be shared with other regions. This region knows what chronic diseases mean, when to sound the alarm and, most importantly, what to do, placing health promotion and prevention at the fore and building on the commitment and the willingness to take action at the highest level of the government.

This is the great policy asset of this region, and no doubt one reason why you give us so many worthy models for stopping the epidemic.

I commend your commitment and determination to take action and wish you every success in this noble endeavor.

Thank you.