



Science to tackle non-communicable diseases in South Asia and beyond in the SDG era

Executive Summary

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The incidence of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) is increasing around the world. NCDs are estimated to be responsible for 41 million deaths each year, many of which are categorised as 'premature', shortening lives for those aged between 30 and 69 years. NCDs are driven by rapid urbanisation, unhealthy lifestyles and diets, tobacco and alcohol use, physical inactivity and ageing populations. It is important to note the role commercial determinates of health such as the alcohol, tobacco and other industries may play in promoting unhealthy lifestyles.

South Asia has a significant burden of infectious diseases, which consume research resources, but at the same time there is growing prevalence of NCDs accounting for increasing mortality and morbidity. Many people in rural areas are unaware of the risks posed by tobacco use, alcohol consumption and a sedentary lifestyle. People often seek help from healthcare facilities only once complications have arisen, with the outcome that the condition has usually progressed, is more serious and less easily treated. In Sri Lanka, 19% of the working-age population has at least one NCD, reducing chances of employment and labour earnings compared to the rest of the population.¹

The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are 17 global targets which aim to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all. Goal 3 focuses on good health and wellbeing for all people, and includes the objective of reducing premature mortality from NCDs by one-third by 2030. The prevention, treatment and promotion of good mental health and wellbeing all play a role.

At a two-day workshop held by the UK Academy of Medical Sciences and the National Academy of Sciences of Sri Lanka in January 2020, a number of challenges and barriers to addressing NCDs in South Asia were identified by participants:

- **A lack of NCD data** – South Asia has a high NCD burden but little published research on the topic in the region. Furthermore, there is a lack of incidence and mortality data and limited electronic health records.
- **Population-specific risk factors are not known** – Genetic studies have focused on European and North American populations and shed little light for South Asian populations who have different genetic and metabolic patterns.
- **Limited access to healthcare** – Many people in South Asia have limited access to healthcare and support services.
- **Lack of research incentives and support** – There is limited local funding, a lack of resources and infrastructure, and few incentives for research in the region.

1. Kumara AS & Samaratunge R (2018). *The effects of chronic non-communicable diseases on labour force outcomes: Quasi experimental evidence from Sri Lanka*. *Economics & Human Biology* **31**, 40-53.

Despite the challenges, participants identified opportunities to accelerate progress in NCD research, implement tools and identify innovations that could support researchers and healthcare workers:

- **Improving NCD data** – Research to identify and understand regional NCD risk factors as well as underlying commercial determinants, is essential for developing the best approaches for the region.
- **Building research capacity** – Increased leadership, collaboration between disciplines and across borders and an integrated approach will help tackle the problems of NCDs and multimorbidity. Collaboration and networks add value to research outputs and provide opportunities for capacity development. They bring together researchers, practitioners and policymakers from multiple disciplines to work collaboratively over an extended period of time to tackle a problem.
- **Building healthcare capacity** – Priority should be given to building capacity in primary and secondary care, with an emphasis on prevention, early detection, diagnosis and treatment of NCDs.
- **Developing prevention strategies** – Research should focus on healthier and affordable food choices, on behavioural factors and on the social, economic and environmental dimensions of NCDs.
- **Developing technical innovations** – Low-cost and effective detection, treatments and continuum of care can be supported by emerging technologies and mobile apps, provided they are clinically validated, appropriately regulated and integrated into healthcare systems.

For an area like NCDs where there are common themes between diseases, a collaborative approach could aid the development and implementation of acceptable, equitable, scalable and sustainable approaches to reduce disease burdens. The creation of a South Asian network across the region could help address the challenges of NCDs, bring opportunities to researchers, and improve healthcare systems and addressing relevant industry activities.



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