

The Shanghai Declaration of the Worldwide Universities Network¹ on early life opportunities for addressing non-communicable diseases

A statement related to the forthcoming United Nations (UN) high-level meeting of the General Assembly on the prevention and control of non-communicable diseases (NCDs)².

22 May 2011

1. As a group of world-class institutions with substantial expertise in NCD research, the Worldwide Universities Network (WUN) applauds the UN's increasing focus on NCDs, especially in low and middle income countries and transitioning populations.
2. The high-level meeting of the General Assembly to be held in September 2011 provides a unique opportunity to address the prevention and control of NCDs worldwide. WUN recommends that NCD prevention will be considerably advanced by giving greater emphasis to a life-course approach including a focus on early life.
3. The recommendation for a greater emphasis on a life-course approach to NCD prevention is based on substantial evidence for the inextricable linkage of maternal, perinatal, infant and childhood factors³ to the risk of developing NCDs later in life by changing the sensitivity to later life exposures⁴.
4. The evidence indicates important early life opportunities for preventive interventions which, alongside interventions and treatments in adults, are part of an integrated life-course strategy to reduce the burden of NCDs.
5. Particular attention should be paid to both population- and individual-based approaches to increase access to education, to promote health literacy in children, adolescents and parents and to empowering women, both to reduce the burden of NCDs and to provide other benefits.

¹ WUN comprises 16 world-leading universities, focused on international collaboration in research and graduate education. Through its Global Challenge Programme it convened a meeting in Shanghai on 19-21 May 2011 to address Early Life Opportunities for the Prevention of NCD in Developing Countries. WUN is committed to collaborative multilateral research, education and capacity building in this area.

² This declaration was produced by WUN in response to a request from Dr Ala Alwan, Assistant Director General of WHO for non-communicable diseases to provide a summary statement on the role of development in relationship to NCDs arising from an expert meeting conducted by WUN on Early Life Opportunities for the Prevention of NCD in Developing Countries. To ensure balance to the discussion and a broader perspective, leading academics from non-WUN universities in Latin America, Asia, the Caribbean and Africa were invited to participate in the meeting and in the writing of this summary statement.

³ Such factors include aspects of parental health, lifestyle and behaviour, the wider environmental influences acting early in the life course, adverse pregnancy outcomes, and maternal and infant nutrition.

⁴ Disorders for which developmental factors are implicated include: obesity and diabetes, cardiovascular disease, chronic respiratory disease, some cancers, chronic renal disease, chronic liver disease, mental ill-health, osteoporosis, allergic diseases and neurodegenerative disorders.

6. There is now substantial evidence that some initiatives to promote a healthy start to life⁵ will reduce the risk of later NCDs. Such initiatives provide additional important short-,
7. medium- and long-term health and economic benefits⁶ for individuals and populations. Low cost interventions applied early in the life course and which have long-term benefit life are particularly cost effective.
8. A greater emphasis is recommended to applying a broader developmental perspective⁷ to NCD prevention. This will additionally have wider social and economic benefits by strengthening the basic right to a healthy start to life, education and gender equity.
9. Effective and equitable NCD prevention in the developing world requires the formation, support and evaluation of new initiatives and partnerships⁸ in science and policy. Such initiatives should report to and be coordinated by a multi-agency body reporting to the Secretary-General charged with NCD prevention, including representation from interested UN agencies, the World and Development Banks, other international organisations, foundations, academia, civil society organisations and the private sector.

The WUN recognises its own responsibilities as an alliance of research universities with expertise in these domains. In partnership with other academic institutions, agencies and other organisations in both developed and developing countries, WUN is committed to research and capacity building with a goal of promoting a more effective life course approach to preventing NCDs and ameliorating their impact.

⁵ Key components include optimizing parents' lifestyle before conception, maternal health before and during pregnancy, maternal nutrition, early diagnosis and treatment of gestational diabetes, breast feeding, infant and child nutrition and development. A number of these interventions can be synergistically linked to current programmes on maternal and child health, infectious disease and to the Millennium Development Goals.

⁶ Examples include improved infant survival, improved cognitive development, healthier families

⁷ Taking into account factors such as the context- and culture-specificity of societal structures, local environmental factors, dietary and physical activity patterns, infectious diseases and changes in family size.

⁸ Including public-private partnerships – by way of example, a constructive engagement with the food industry will be a critical element in establishing better nutrition across the life course.