

Alarmed Global AIDS activists Join the Fight to Ensure a Successful UN Non-Communicable Disease Summit

Date: 1 September 2011

Source: KEIonline.org

Civil society groups unite to tackle trade, fight for targets and to eliminate industry influence; file complaint with the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Health

September 1, 2011 -- Negotiations resume on the draft political declaration for the first United Nations General Assembly Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) High-Level Meeting (HLM) in New York City today.

Alarmed by explicit efforts led by developed countries to weaken the Declaration's language in a way that will undermine effective prevention and treatment of NCDs, over 70 public health NGOs and groups representing hundreds, if not thousands, of people living with HIV/AIDS from across the globe are now sounding the alarm.

Their concern is that a watered down political declaration will roll back the advances made realising access to medicines for all and will threaten the right to health of millions of people, especially those living in developing countries.

'The richer, more powerful countries are putting global health at risk for trade interests and economic gain,' says Sandeep Kishore of the Young Professionals Chronic Disease Network. 'The draft has been crippled - currently devoid of any prevention or treatment targets, lacking bold commitments to action and packed with proposals aimed at diluting governments' obligations to keep private interests driving NCDs, including tobacco firms, in check. These actions constitute human rights violations and will cost lives.'

Taking action

The global coalition is now petitioning the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Health to take urgent action against countries acting contrary to human rights in the negotiations. The complaint targets a bloc of developed

countries, including the US, Canada, European Union and Japan, that have been thwarting key proposals which would give the declaration on NCDs 'teeth' through time-bound targets and robust States' commitments to undertake interventions proven to be effective. These actions together threaten the ability of States to comply with their obligations to respect, protect and fulfill the right to health and ensure access to medicines for all.

Access to medicines advocates who are turning their attention to NCDs have been quick to see the parallels with battles for access to HIV/AIDS and TB medications.

'It is time to take the lessons and victories from the access to medicines movement's HIV/AIDS advocacy and apply them to the emerging NCD crisis, a crisis which is rapidly being recognised as the major health crisis of the poor and dispossessed,' says Rachel Kiddell-Monroe, President of Universities Allied for Essential Medicines and former aid worker with Medecins Sans Frontieres. 'I watched helplessly as patients died of AIDS in Rwanda in 1994 because the medicines were too expensive. Now those AIDS patients would have a chance of receiving treatment. But the same cannot be said if they had diabetes or cancer.'

AIDS activists the world over agree

'People with HIV need access to antiretroviral therapy, but we all are also susceptible to non-communicable diseases, which also need treatment. Although I have HIV, I am on antiretroviral therapy and thus am more likely now to die of non-communicable diseases like cancer, heart disease or stroke than AIDS,' says Gregg Gonsalves of the International Treatment Preparedness Coalition. 'Whether we are advocating for access to HIV medicines or to NCD medicines, this is a battle for medicines for all.'

The union of the NCD and HIV civil society movements represents a watershed moment in global health and strengthens global calls to action for a strong UN summit on NCDs. 'People died during long and hard-won battles for access to HIV/AIDS medicines; we will not stand by and allow this to happen again for people suffering from cancer, diabetes and heart disease,' says Shiba Phurailatpam, Director of the Asia-Pacific Network of People Living with HIV/AIDS.

While the UN declaration on HIV/AIDS that emerged in June featured clear commitments to targets and also endorsed the use of important flexibilities guaranteed by the WTO TRIPS Agreement to ensure trade did not trump patient rights, the United States, in particular, has blocked all attempts for similar language in the NCD declaration. 'The US government and our courts have used compulsory licenses on patents that diagnose and treat cancer, to force the licensing of patents on stem cell lines, and to promote research on a wide range of non-communicable diseases and conditions. Developing countries, which have almost no access to many new cancer drugs, want language in the Declaration to establish the legitimacy of using compulsory licenses, to make access to cancer drugs more equal. We are deeply disappointed in the Obama Administration, for working so closely with the drug companies to weaken the declaration, ' says Krista Cox from Knowledge Ecology International.

Successful outcomes are possible

The coalition is seeking accountability from all Member States involved in negotiating the NCD Political Declaration this week. 'It is important that the Declaration call upon Member States to avoid conflicts of interest in their efforts of prevention and control of NCDs' says Gopakumar of the Third World Network. Speaking as one voice, communities and public health organizations around the world are petitioning to be heard, for their key concerns taken seriously and addressed. Rohit Malpani, Senior Advisor at Oxfam affirms: 'It would be a profound disappointment for a Declaration that is intended to promote public health to do less to promote access to medicines than existing global trade agreements. Oxfam urgently calls upon world leaders to ensure that strong and robust commitments to ensure access to affordable medicines is not left out of the final Declaration.' World leaders must act immediately and responsibly to deliver key changes and ensure actionable, measurable outcomes in the political declaration.

Keywords: AIDS / UN / Non-Communicable Disease