

World Health Organization Statement at the SIDS4 Conference General Debate

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

WHO congratulates Antigua and Barbuda for hosting this landmark conference.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed deep-rooted structural weaknesses in the health systems of Small Island Developing States, and placed unprecedented pressures on their already constrained financial and human resources.

The shock of COVID-19 was compounded by their geographical isolation, and the dramatic impacts of climate change – all slowing progress towards sustainable development targets.

The lessons for the health sector are crystal clear and should be heeded. There is an urgent need to expand access to domestic financing and international development finance mechanisms in order to strengthen health and social protection systems in SIDS, including integration of the climate-health nexus and the One Health approach.

WHO welcomes the adoption of the "Antigua and Barbuda Agenda for SIDS" and we take this opportunity to outline a few health-related priorities for leaders of Small Island Developing States, development partners and donors.

First, we call on the international community to support the SIDS in their efforts to strengthen their health systems, including through enhanced official development assistance, debt relief and financial and technical support for research, development and innovation programmes.

Second, we must urgently reduce the disproportionately high burden of noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) and mental health conditions, and integrate NCD and mental health services into primary health care, through which up to 90% of health services could be provided. This is of particular importance, given that the rate of hypertension is over 30% in almost all SIDS, and up to 15% of the population in the Caribbean and 11% in the Pacific are estimated to live with a mental health condition.

The WHO's "best buys", is a set of cost-effective interventions to prevent and manage NCDs, including taxes and regulation – which are powerful tools for limiting the impact of health harming products, including highly processed foods, which are energy dense, high in saturated fats, free sugars, or salt. Reliance on such food has resulted in very high levels of obesity among both women and men. In some SIDS up to 90% of food is imported and hence we need to invest in best practices and market changes for increasing consumption of food, vegetables, and poultry.

Third, we have to address the health impacts of climate change. It is imperative to improve health emergency preparedness and to strengthen the resilience of the health sector in SIDS to better cope with epidemics, pandemics, and climate-induced emergencies.

And fourth, we must accelerate actions to address the urgent challenges that relate to the training, employment and retention of health and care workers in the SIDS. Up to 15% of health workforce in SIDS depart for opportunities in developed countries and therefore measures are required to employ, protect, and retain health workers and to manage migration in line with the WHO global code of practice on international recruitment of health personnel.

Last June in Barbados, SIDS Ministers of Health adopted the 2023 Bridgetown Declaration on NCDs and mental health, and WHO commits to work for its full implementation in meeting these challenges.

Furthermore, SIDS require multisectoral and whole-of-government responses, including an expansion of tailored regional programmes, and coordinated support from bilateral donors and international development partners.

Despite limited resources, SIDS have shown remarkable resilience in the face of adversity. They have also made clear their priorities for the next 10-year development agenda, including those on health.

We stand ready to support the implementation of the “Antigua and Barbuda Agenda for SIDS” including the development of the monitoring and evaluation framework, as well as the SIDS Centre of Excellence, including the SIDS Global Data Hub. WHO is already working with many SIDS towards digitalization of health information and integrating digital transformation within health systems.

This conference is a historic opportunity for all of us to come together and take decisive action for building a healthy, sustainable, resilient and equitable future for all SIDS.

WHO is and will remain your steadfast partner.

I thank you.