

# UCN Non Communicable Diseases Bulletin

Issue

Fighting NCDs, Saving Lives  
in Africa



# Foreword

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Dear Colleagues and Partners,

I am pleased to announce the launch of the WHO Regional Office for Africa Noncommunicable Disease (NCD) quarterly bulletin.

This is a momentous occasion for our team and a significant step forward in our ongoing efforts to combat the growing burden of NCDs in Africa.

This bulletin represents our commitment to sharing vital information, best practices, and the latest developments in NCD prevention and control. We believe that access to timely and accurate information is crucial in strengthening our collective response to NCDs.

In this issue, you'll find updates on our activities in the region, best practices from countries, and insights from NCD experts, designed to empower healthcare professionals, policymakers, and the public.

We envision this bulletin as a platform for collaboration and knowledge sharing. We encourage you to engage with the content, share it with your networks, and provide us with your valuable feedback. Your input will be instrumental in shaping future editions and ensuring that the bulletin remains a relevant and impactful tool.

Thank you for your continued support and dedication.

Together, we can make a difference in the lives of people affected by NCDs.

Dr Benido Impouma

Director of the Communicable and Noncommunicable  
Diseases (UCN) Cluster

WHO Regional Office for Africa

# NCDs Situation and Response actions in Africa April 2025

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# NCD stats at a GLANCE

## WHO STEPwise approach



- In five years **(2020-2024)**, **18** countries have conducted STEPS surveys.
- Eleven countries have completed the full STEPS process.

## In Sierra Leone



Tobacco tax tariffs are projected to push a **10-14%** drop in tobacco sales by **2027** and a **106-172%** revenue surge.

## D-CARD Africa



- Over **3674** healthcare professionals equipped with skills to implement WHO guidelines, and NCD e-tracker.
- Over **500 000** individuals received vital diabetes information in Uganda.

## In Ghana



Over **440** primary healthcare workers across Ghana's **16** regions equipped with the tools to identify, manage, and support individuals with mental health challenges.

## NORAD-WHO initiative



- In four years, over **1.7 million** people screened for hypertension
- more than **358 000** for diabetes, and over **75 000** for cervical cancer in Ghana.

## PEN-Plus project



- As of January **2025**, **20** countries in the region are either initiating, implementing and scaling up PEN=Plus model
- Over **15 000** people are receiving treatment for severe NCDs in PEN-Plus clinics across the

## 1

# Spotlight on NCD activities in the region

***PEN-Plus: Transforming treatment of  
severe NCDs in Africa***

**The PEN-Plus initiative has resulted in life-saving treatment for over 15 000 individuals, according to a recent WHO PEN-Plus report.**

<sup>1</sup> Nine African countries – Ethiopia, Kenya, Liberia, Mozambique, Sierra Leone, Uganda, United Republic of Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe – have established their first PEN-Plus clinics and training sites, marking a tangible shift in healthcare delivery. An additional six countries – Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana, and Nigeria – have begun the initiation process, signaling a broader regional embrace of the model.



Fifteen<sup>1</sup> countries in the WHO African Region are now at different phases of implementing the PEN-Plus strategy, a program designed to decentralize care for people living with severe chronic noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) in hard-to-reach communities. The PEN-Plus initiative has resulted in life-saving treatment for over 15 000 individuals, according to a recent WHO PEN-Plus report.

The report indicates that twenty countries have completed baseline assessments and reached phase 1 of the PEN-Plus implementation framework, demonstrating strong national commitments. Supported by the Helmsley Charitable Trust, WHO Regional

Office for Africa and partners like the NCDI Poverty Network the PEN-Plus model addresses the critical gap in access to care for conditions like type 1 diabetes, sickle cell disease, and rheumatic heart disease in resource-limited settings.

PEN-Plus expansion in countries highlights the effectiveness of the model in strengthening health systems and improving the lives of individuals living with severe NCDs across the African Region. WHO Regional Office for Africa and partners remain committed to supporting countries in scaling up PEN-Plus and ensuring sustainable access to essential NCD care for all.

## 2024 Kinshasa Forum: Accelerating efforts towards cervical cancer elimination

Kinshasa became the center of a powerful movement this past November as leaders from across the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the World Health Organization (WHO) convened to accelerate the elimination of cervical cancer. The 2024 Kinshasa Forum, held on 14-15 November, was a catalyst for transformative action cervical cancer elimination.

Under the leadership of Dr Matshidiso Moeti, WHO's Regional Director for Africa (now RD Emeritus), the

forum became a rallying call for change. During the forum, Dr Moeti championed cervical cancer elimination at the highest political levels, solidifying WHO's unwavering commitment through a new cooperation strategy, and uniting partners in a shared vision.

Powerful recommendations emerged from the forum, aimed at the DRC government, its partners, and WHO:

- **Invest:** In governance, research, and life-saving vaccinations.

- **Fund:** Capacity building and the adoption of cutting-edge technologies.
- **Sustain:** Advocacy, integrate artificial intelligence, and enhance coordination.

These recommendations stand as roadmap to a future free from cervical cancer and a path where every woman has the chance for a healthy future.



The 2024 Kinshasa forum was an opportunity for WHO to champion cervical cancer elimination



## ***The WICs Project: Uniting against cancers affecting women***

Breast and cervical cancers are devastating the lives of women across sub-Saharan Africa, with startlingly high mortality rates due to late diagnosis and limited access to care. To combat this crisis, WHO, with funding from Roche, launched the Women Integrated Cancer Services in Africa (WICS) project in October 2024.

This initiative, rolled out in Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya, and Zimbabwe, aims to integrate breast, cervical, and other NCD cancer services into primary healthcare systems. By strengthening these systems, WICS will improve early diagnosis, treatment, and care, targeting the screening of at least 30 000 women over three years.

The official launch in Côte d'Ivoire marked a crucial step, bringing together high-level stakeholders to mobilize support and showcase the project's framework. The event underscored the importance of integrated cancer and NCDs services within primary healthcare, highlighting the commitment to equitable access and reduced health disparities. This project represents a powerful partnership, demonstrating a shared commitment to improving women's health and reducing the cancer burden in Africa.

**The official launch in Côte d'Ivoire marked a crucial step, bringing together high-level stakeholders to mobilize support and showcase the project's framework.**

**WICS aims to improve early diagnosis, treatment, and care, targeting the screening of at least 30 000 women over three years**



## ***NORAD-WHO initiative: Easing the burden for people with hypertension, diabetes and cervical cancer in Ethiopia***

Ethiopia is witnessing a tangible transformation in its fight against noncommunicable diseases (NCDs), particularly hypertension, diabetes, and cervical cancer thanks to the implementation of the NORAD-WHO Initiative.

A recent mid-term evaluation by the WHO Ethiopia Country Office and Addis Ababa University School of Public Health reveals significant strides in improving health service delivery and patient outcomes for hypertension, diabetes, and cervical cancer.

According to the study, Ethiopia's health intervention facilities now have better-trained staff, essential medical equipment, and reliable medication supplies, leading to increased patient visits and improved disease management. This initiative has also driven a surge in screening rates for hypertension, diabetes, and cervical cancer, enabling earlier interventions and better long-term health outcomes.

The NORAD-WHO project aimed at strengthening the delivery of basic non-communicable diseases

(NCDs) services in Ethiopia has successfully integrated NCD care into primary health facilities, fostering a comprehensive approach.

Despite the remarkable progress, challenges like staff shortages and funding constraints persist. To sustain the gains made, WHO recommends that the country prioritize ongoing training and mentorship for healthcare workers, increase NCD funding and leverage digital innovations for real-time data management.

### **COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**



### **AWARENESS CREATION | MOBILIZATION**





## ***D-Card Africa: Advancing Diabetes & Cardiovascular Care with Digital Innovation***

The D-Card Africa Initiative, a WHO/World Diabetes Foundation (WDF) collaboration, has made significant progress in its first year, strengthening diabetes and cardiovascular disease (CVD) prevention and care in Ghana and Uganda. Aligned with the WHO Global Diabetes Compact, the initiative has enhanced governance, service delivery, workforce capacity, and digital health solutions to improve NCD management in the African Region.

### **Key Achievements of the D-Card Project**



**Empowered healthcare workers in Ghana and Uganda with digital tools—tablets and mobile phones— to provide continuous patient tracking and care.**



**Over 3674 healthcare professionals equipped with the skills to implement WHO guidelines, and the NCD e-tracker pilot**



**In Uganda, Over 500 000 individuals received vital diabetes information in Uganda**

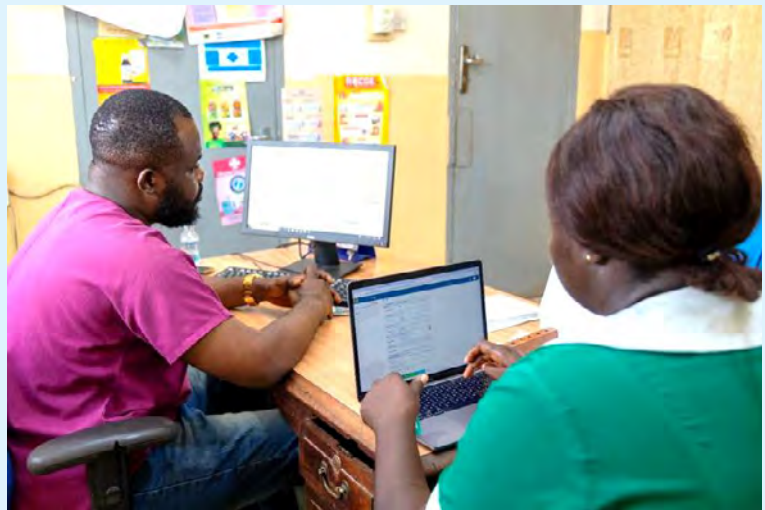


**The initiative strengthens governance, research, and policy, creating a model for integrated care across the African Region.**



## Community screening for high blood pressure and diabetes at one of the health facilities in Uganda

## Pilot testing of NCD e-tracker in Birim central district- Ghana



## ***Africa facing critical shortage of oral health care workers amid rising disease burden***

Africa is facing a chronic shortage of oral health care workers, a new oral health fact sheet by World Health Organization (WHO), shows.

The WHO fact sheet shows that the region has been experiencing the highest increased number of oral diseases compared to other WHO regions. Oral diseases, such as dental caries, gum diseases, and tooth loss, remain common in the WHO African Region, affecting about 44% of the population.

In 2022, the continent had only 56 772 oral health professionals, a fraction of the number needed for basic universal health coverage. This stark deficit leaves millions vulnerable to preventable suffering.

The situation demands urgent action. Oral health remains a low priority in many African countries, leading to inadequate investment and weak prevention efforts. The WHO fact sheet calls for immediate steps to address the workforce

crisis, including aligning national strategies with global guidelines, implementing needs-based planning, enhancing data management, shifting to preventive care models, and exploring innovative workforce solutions like task-sharing. Prioritizing oral health is crucial to alleviate suffering and improving overall health outcomes across the region.



**Oral diseases, such as dental caries, gum diseases, and tooth loss remain prevalent in the WHO African Region, affecting about 44% of the population.**

## ***Accelerating NCD control with data-driven surveillance***

The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that NCDs are a leading cause of mortality, accounting for [40% of global deaths](#). In Africa, the situation is equally concerning, with NCDs accounting for more than half a million deaths in children, adolescents and young adults living in some of the poorest areas. This rising NCD burden is fueled by lifestyle changes, urbanization, and limited healthcare access.

To address this critical health threat, WHO launched a comprehensive nationwide assessment of NCD

risk factors using WHO's STEPwise approach. This survey offers vital data to inform policy, enhance NCD surveillance, and facilitate evidence-based interventions that can save lives.

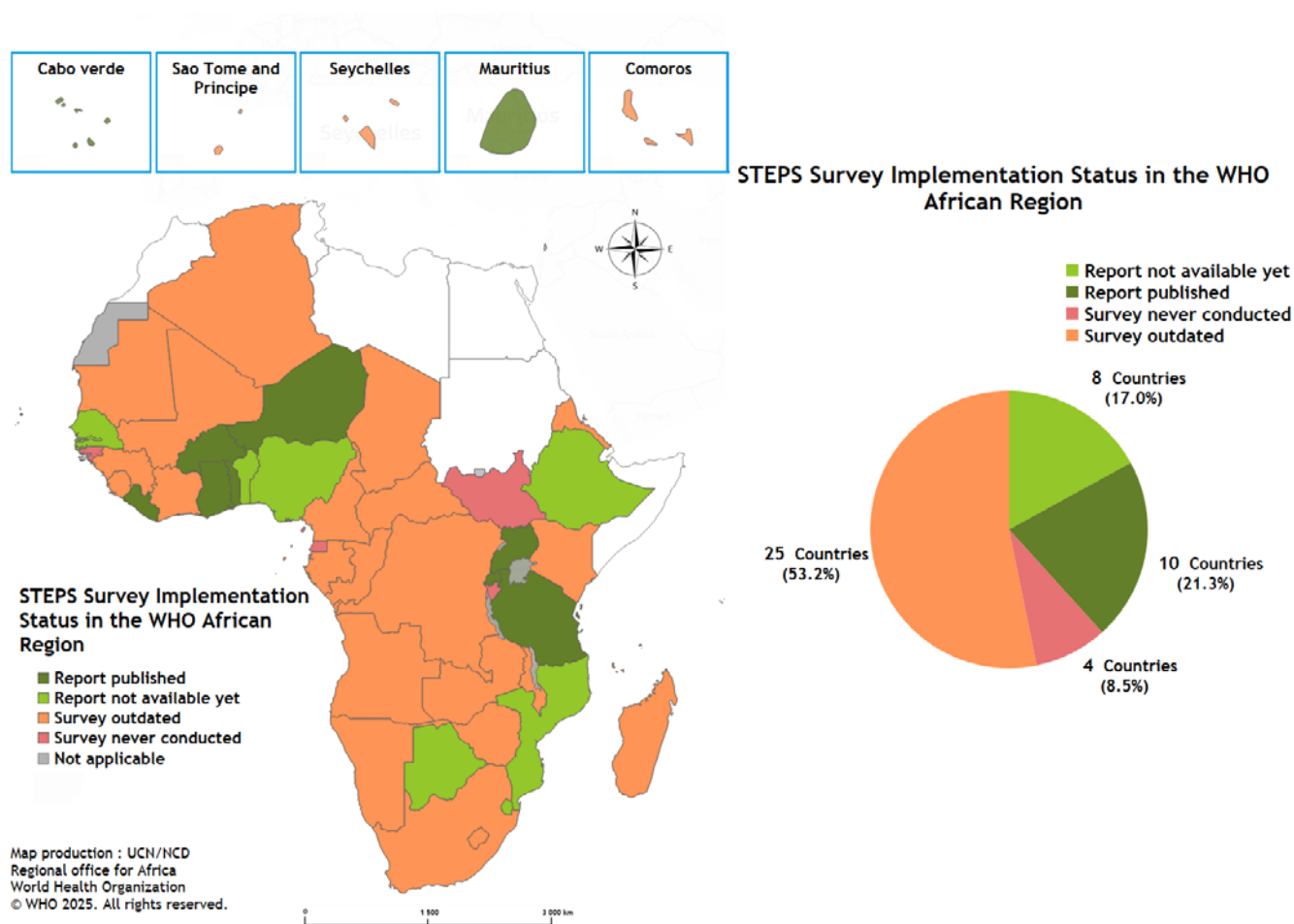
In the past five years (2020-2024), 18 countries (38.3%) have conducted STEPS surveys, nearly doubling the participation rate from the previous period. This surge demonstrates a powerful commitment to strengthening NCD surveillance and implementing evidence-based health policies.

Eleven countries have completed the full STEPS process, from data collection to rigorous analysis and reporting, with their findings now available on the [WHO website](#). These reports provide crucial benchmarks for the region.

Ghana's recent STEPS report, with an impressive 94.2% participation rate, exemplifies the power of robust data. This data will serve as a cornerstone for monitoring and evaluating Ghana's 2022-2027 Multisectoral Action Plan for NCDs, highlighting the survey's pivotal role in shaping national strategies.

**“Countries’ commitment to scaling up NCD surveillance is driving significant progress towards data-driven health policies. It sets the stage for long-term efforts to reduce NCD prevalence and promote healthier living across Ghana”.**





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Figure 1: STEPS survey implementations in the WHO African Region -NCD surveillance WHO Africa

## 2

## Country best practice

### *Integrating NCD management into primary healthcare: The Ethiopian model*

Ethiopia has demonstrated a powerful model for integrating non-communicable disease (NCD) care into primary healthcare, achieving remarkable results through the WHO Africa-NORAD project. Since 2020, this initiative has focused on equitable access, providing essential screening tools and comprehensive training for healthcare workers. By equipping local health facilities with screening tools and training healthcare workers, Ethiopia has screened millions for hypertension, diabetes, and cervical cancer, resulting in thousands receiving timely care. In four years, the project screened over 1.7 million for hypertension, more than 358 000 for diabetes, and over 75 000 for cervical cancer. Through the implementation of this project, thousands of patients

with detected conditions were enrolled in care, demonstrating its direct impact.

The project's success is attributed to a strategic combination of strong government commitment, community-based health insurance, and the practical implementation of WHO PEN protocols. The inclusion of pharmacists in team-based care further enhanced service delivery. This model, now recognized as a best practice, is being shared across the African Region, fostering a network of collaboration and knowledge transfer. Ethiopia's experience highlights the vital role of decentralized care in improving NCD outcomes, paving the way for healthier communities across the continent.

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cancer**



## ***Combatting the oral health crisis in Sierra Leone***

For a long time, Sierra Leone has faced significant disparities in access to dental health services, leaving over 82% of schoolchildren with dental caries and more than 30% of the population suffering from untreated dental decay.

Recognizing the burden of this noncommunicable disease on the country's overall health and

progress towards Universal Health Coverage (UHC), WHO Regional Office for Africa has partnered with Sierra Leone's Ministry of Health to forge a transformative National Oral Health Strategy. This plan, rooted in evidence and equity, will integrate oral health into national policies, prioritize prevention, and strengthen services.

This strategic plan will serve as a roadmap to revolutionize oral health in Sierra Leone, driving tangible improvements in quality of life, reducing disease burden, and advancing UHC goals. By prioritizing oral health, Sierra Leone is investing in a healthier, more prosperous future for all its citizens.

**Sierra Leone's national oral health strategy will integrate oral health into national policies, prioritize prevention, and strengthen services.**





## ***Protecting young people through tobacco tax policy***

Every year, more than 3000 people die from tobacco-related diseases in Sierra Leone. The tobacco threat is one of the most significant public health challenges the country has ever faced affecting particularly young people and the poor.

Tobacco use among adolescents in the country is enabled by affordable and easy access to tobacco products for everyone.

To protect young people from the use of tobacco, e-cigarettes, and other nicotine products, WHO Regional Office for Africa, in partnership with Ministry of Health, has proposed a three-year roadmap reform aimed at introducing new tariffs on tobacco products. These tax tariffs will significantly reduce tobacco consumption and increase government revenue. Additionally, WHO has empowered government

officials, providing critical training and modeling tools to implement these evidence-based tax reforms. The implementation of the tariffs is projected to nudge a 10-14% drop in tobacco sales by 2027 and a 106-172% revenue surge. This will mean fewer deaths, less healthcare strain, and more funds for public health in Sierra Leone.

**“By increasing taxes on cigarettes and tobacco, we're making it harder for our kids to start smoking and helping current smokers quit, said Dr Sartie Kenneh, Chief Medical Officer, Ministry of Health, Sierra Leone.”**



## Advancing NCD monitoring in Ghana through E-tracker development

Ghana is currently developing the E-Tracker system to enhance the monitoring of patient outcomes, improve healthcare delivery, and reduce complications.

Currently, Ghana reports aggregated health data. The E-Tracker represents a paradigm shift, enabling detailed, individual-level tracking, aligning with global health standards and enhancing patient outcome monitoring. Following successful end-user and field testing, the E-Tracker is set for nationwide deployment in early 2025, positioning Ghana as a leader in digital NCD management.

The WHO Regional Office for Africa, has been a crucial partner in this journey, providing technical and strategic support to the Ghana Health Service. This collaboration, aligned with WHO's global health information system strengthening goals, ensured the E-Tracker's design, testing, and refinement. With WHO's support, Ghana is leveraging digital innovation to strengthen its health system, improve healthcare delivery, and accelerate action against NCDs, demonstrating a powerful partnership for public health progress.

### Empowering diabetes and hypertension clients to fight NCDs

Knowledge is power, especially when battling chronic diseases. In Ghana's Western Region, a vital self-care meeting has armed people living with

diabetes and hypertension with the tools to manage these diseases hence transforming lives and fostering community.

Recognizing self-management as crucial for comprehensive care, WHO Africa Regional Office alongside health workers, organized a session focused on empowering patients. During the meeting, participants gained essential knowledge on understanding their conditions, adhering to medication, self-monitoring, and recognizing warning signs. Practical demonstrations of healthy meal preparation and exercise routines reinforced learning, while peer-led discussions fostered a supportive environment.

The impact was profound. Eighty clients attended, leaving with a newfound sense of control. As one participant shared, **"I feel in control of my health now."** Another, a **young type 1 diabetes client, declared, "Through exercise, diet, and medication, I've learned that diabetes doesn't have to limit my life, said Durowaa Oduro Yeboah, Secretary, Diabetes Youth Care."**

Beyond the session, peer support networks emerged, providing ongoing support and shared learning. Participants are now advocating for more frequent sessions, recognizing the transformative power of this vital training. This initiative demonstrates how empowering patients with knowledge and fostering community can significantly improve chronic disease management.

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## 3

# Mental health corner

## *Breaking stigma around men's mental health in Africa*

**The continent bears the world's highest male suicide rate, a devastating 18 per 100 000 population, far surpassing global averages.**



Globally, over 500 million men grapple with mental health disorders, but in Africa, the crisis is particularly acute. The continent bears the world's highest male suicide rate, a devastating 18 per 100 000 population, far surpassing global averages. This startling figure is possibly fueled by deep-seated cultural norms that equate masculinity with stoicism, which prevents men from seeking help.

To confront this urgent health crisis, the WHO Regional Office for Africa recently convened a powerful regional public awareness webinar

under the theme, "Conversations about Men's Mental Health in Africa," in collaboration with Global Action on Men's Health and the International Association for Suicide Prevention (IASP). The event brought together 160 participants from across the region. Experts like Prof. Derek Griffith and Dr Kylie King offered insights on creating supportive systems and implementing targeted suicide prevention strategies.

During the webinar, an emotional personal story of overcoming depression highlighted the importance of seeking help, while



the Ministry of Health from South Africa showcased a practical model of integrating mental health services into men's health clinics.

This webinar marks a critical step towards breaking the silence surrounding men's mental health in Africa. A follow up regional stakeholders' consultation on strategies to address men's mental health challenges and the disproportionately high male suicide rate in the region is being planned.

WHO Africa is committed to fostering dialogue, challenging harmful stereotypes, and promoting accessible, male-friendly mental health services in the bid to create a healthier future for men across the region.

The meeting recording can be accessed here: <https://who.zoom.us/rec/share/37m08vrtorM2eGkdFnwx2j-4B-Tlcl88rR6-p8Ab-T0jSqx6GHe4qoaEZs2nUsn.Ob6GiViuoX5fZdcd> (Passcode: CSe.^0J&)

**The event brought together 160 participants from across the region.**

## ***Some voices of participants during the webinar***

*"We tell men to be strong, but we forget strength isn't about hiding pain. It's about having the courage to ask for help. And until we challenge outdated ideas of masculinity, we'll keep losing men to a silent fight."*

*"To truly make a difference, we need to leverage social media. These platforms offer unparalleled reach, allowing us to connect with and support men facing mental health challenges on a massive scale."*

## ***Prioritizing maternal mental health for stronger families***

Ghana is confronting the critical link between maternal mental health (MMH) and infant well-being. Despite clear evidence of the detrimental impact of MMH disorders, the current healthcare system lacks adequate screening and management. Recognizing this gap, Ghana has taken decisive steps to integrate MMH interventions across all levels of care

A comprehensive situational analysis, policy briefs, and an operational plan with robust monitoring and evaluation framework have been developed, providing a clear roadmap for action.

Supported by WHO Africa and UK-FCDO, these resources will strengthen policy, build institutional capacity, and ensure quality MMH services. This initiative aligns with national and global health priorities, aiming to improve maternal and newborn care.



**Despite clear evidence of the detrimental impact of MMH disorders, the current healthcare system lacks adequate screening and management.**



## ***Integrating mental health services into primary care***

Ghana is pioneering a paradigm shift in healthcare by decentralizing mental health services and embedding them within local clinics, to address the long-neglected needs of its population.

This integrated approach is ensuring vulnerable populations receive dignified and comprehensive support.

Recognizing the critical role of skilled personnel for this initiative, Ghana, with WHO's support, has invested in robust capacity building of health care workers.

Over 440 primary healthcare workers across Ghana's 16 regions are now equipped with the tools and knowledge to identify, manage, and support individuals facing mental health challenges.

By empowering these frontline workers with essential skills and knowledge, Ghana is tackling the 98% treatment gap for mental health and setting a powerful precedent in prioritizing holistic healthcare to improve mental health outcomes.



**This integrated approach is ensuring vulnerable populations receive dignified and comprehensive support.**



## 4

# Insights from NCD experts

“

At a time of great turbulence in the global health community, efforts such as Global Initiative for childhood cancers and the Global Access Platform for Childhood Cancer Medicines represent pillars of hope for many children. St. Jude Children's Research Hospital remains committed to working with WHO and all engaged partners to change the paradigm of how we think and manage catastrophic diseases of childhood globally now and in years to come

”

**Nickhill Bhakta, MD, MPH**

Associate Member,  
St. Jude Children's Research Hospital



“

When discussing NCDs in low-income countries, we often focus on prevalence rather than severity. Yet children who develop severe NCDs such as type 1 diabetes are guaranteed to die without treatment. The PEN-Plus movement shows that where children are born does not have to determine whether they live or die.

”

**Dr Gene Bukhman**

Co-Chair,  
NCDI Poverty Network



“

Noncommunicable diseases are set to overtake communicable, maternal, neonatal, and nutritional diseases combined as the leading cause of mortality in sub-Saharan Africa by 2030. Most people with non-communicable disease are unaware of their status. Deploying innovative digital solutions such as wearables, and data analytics will ensure adults in targeted communities know their basic NCDs status and take appropriate action.

”

**Dr Kofi Mensah Nyarko**

Team Lead-Non Communicable Diseases,  
WHO Africa



“

Each year, severe NCDs cause more than half a million avoidable deaths among children, adolescents, and young adults in rural areas of low-income countries. Fortunately, we now have a proven, cost-effective model of care delivery—PEN-Plus, which allows us to save precious lives while ending a great injustice.

”

**Dr Ana Mocumbi**

Co-Chair,  
NCDI Poverty Network





# 5 Recognizing our partners



WHO acknowledges The Leona M. and Harry B. Helmsley Charitable Trust ("Helmsley") - the largest single donor for NCD response in the African Region's history. With Helmsley support, the WHO Regional Office for Africa has assumed a major leadership role as it rolls out technical support for Member States to implement the management and care of severe NCDs at first-level referral hospitals by ensuring that the capacity, infrastructure and logistics for care are available.



WHO acknowledges Roche's critical funding, enabling the launch of the Women Integrated Cancer Services in Africa (WICS) project. This initiative, now active in Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya, and Zimbabwe, is poised to screen at least 30 000 women over three years.



With support from NORAD, the NCD project has been pivotal in improving the prevention and management of NCDs, including diabetes, while the Norad flagship initiative program has enhanced the focus on cardiovascular diseases and diabetes by scaling up integrated services at the primary healthcare (PHC) level.



Hilfsaktion Noma e.V. supports the control of noma in the WHO African region by developing, implementing and monitoring an integrated national noma control programme, in priority countries. In Ethiopia, the noma control programme was implemented as part of the NTD activities.



The Borrow Foundation supports countries such as Madagascar, Tanzania, and Uganda to implement global and regional strategies on oral health by building the capacity of chief dental officers in the Ministry of Health and develop national oral health policy documents



World Diabetes foundation, is a key partner to WHO and Member States in improving access to prevention and management of diabetes through the D-card initiative, a person centered care approach for NCDs at PHC level through implementation of WHO packages like HEARTS, and PEN.



Resolve To Save Lives is key partner to WHO in initiating and scaling up the hypertension control programme through the HEARTS initiative in Nigeria, Ethiopia and Gabon.

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