
SIDS MINISTERIAL CONFERENCE ON NCDs AND MENTAL HEALTH

DR. BARBOSA'S OPENING REMARKS

14 JUNE 2023

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The Hon. Dr Sonia Browne, Minister of State, Ministry of Health and Wellness, Barbados
Senator Dr. the Most Honorable Jerome Walcott, Minister of Health and Wellness, Barbados
Honorable Ministers from the SIDS and PAHO and WHO colleagues
Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General, WHO
Sir George Alleyne, PAHO Director Emeritus
Professor Alafia Samuels
Distinguished ladies and gentlemen:

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to the SIDS Ministerial Conference on NCDs and mental health.

I commend the strategic and political leadership of the Prime Minister of Barbados, the Honorable Mia Mottley, her Minister of Health, Senator Dr. Walcott and his team, and Dr. Tedros, for bringing us together in this beautiful country for such critical discussions to better address NCDs and mental health. As we work to build stronger and more resilient health systems in the wake of the pandemic, the next three days will provide a unique opportunity to share our learnings and chart a bold path forward, centering the experiences, achievements, and needs of SIDS countries.

We are already taking steps to improve our responses to NCDs and mental health across the Region. These start by securing political leadership at the highest levels.

I am grateful to Prime Minister Mottley who continuously inspires us to take action to secure the health of our Region. And recently, PAHO's High-level Commission on Mental Health has launched a new agenda for mental health under the guidance of Her Excellency Epsy Campbell-Barr, former Vice President of Costa Rica, offering concrete recommendations that will translate into a clear pathway for advancing mental health in the Americas.

This year's PAHO Directing Council will also advance a new policy on NCDs in children, youth, and adolescents; as well as a new strategy for improving mental health and suicide prevention.

Indeed, this Ministerial Conference comes at a unique time and will be key to amplifying the voice and the needs of SIDS, bringing NCDs and mental health to the forefront of our priority list.

To build on this momentum, we must act now.

Our region faces a looming triple threat posed by NCDs, mental health conditions, and climate change. SIDS countries remain overwhelmingly vulnerable to this triple threat and can take urgent action to protect the health of their people.

In this spirit, PAHO is poised to expand our commitment and support for the accelerated implementation of NCD and mental health interventions, working closely with all of you.

First, NCDs and mental health must be mainstreamed within primary health care. This means increasing access to screening, diagnosis, and treatment for NCDs and mental health. It means reorienting our health systems towards community-based care. And it means reducing the geographic, financial, and cultural barriers to ensure more people can appropriately manage their chronic conditions. I pledge my unwavering commitment to work with countries in our region to expand these NCD and mental health services as we work towards universal health coverage and access.

Second, we require multisectoral collaboration to address the underlying socio-economic factors driving NCDs and mental health challenges. Nowhere is this clearer than in SIDS countries, which are especially vulnerable to economic and commercial determinants of health. We must, therefore, engage with lawmakers, civil society, professional associations and people with lived experience to enact policies to help prevent NCDs.

One key example is front of package labeling to promote healthy eating. Carrying this out in SIDS countries that are heavily reliant on trade and importation of food products requires a harmonized approach across borders and sectors. However, the region has experienced fierce opposition to proposed nutrition labeling, despite clear evidence of the benefits associated with providing nutrition information on food packages. I urge all of us to act together in adopting front of package labels.

Finally, we must build on the guidance provided in the Port of Spain Declaration and Samoa Pathway, to reinforce NCD risk factor policies, strengthen primary care services for NCDs and mental health, and improve surveillance. It will take continued cross-Caribbean and broader Pan-American partnership to fully realize the commitments in these landmark agreements. PAHO stands ready to support these efforts and help reduce the impact of NCDs and mental health in each and every SIDS country in our Region.

Progress on NCDs depends not only on technical expertise, but more importantly on political leadership.

What has been achieved so far in SIDS countries for NCDs and mental health is a hopeful sign of progress. But our current efforts are not enough to reach the SDG goal of a one-third reduction in NCD premature mortality by 2030.

This is an ambitious, but feasible goal. That's why this meeting is above all an invitation for us to embrace this agenda with all our might and go above and beyond what we've done up to now.

We count on your commitment, investment, and action, just as we count on each other to address NCDs and mental health together.

Thank you.

Dr. Jarbas Barbosa