



Tackle NCDs in Malawi by Buying into the Best Buys

18,629,000

Total population

40%

Percentage of deaths from NCDs

43,500

Total number of NCD deaths

23%

Probability of premature mortality from NCDs

The burden of NCDs in Malawi

Non Communicable Diseases (NCDs) such as cancer, diabetes, cardiovascular and chronic respiratory diseases are estimated to account for 40% of deaths in Malawi (2022), an increase from 32% in 2018¹. These NCDs share modifiable lifestyle risk factors: tobacco use, unhealthy diet, lack of physical activity, and the harmful use of alcohol. To address these risk factors there is a need for robust national NCD prevention and control policies and programs. The World Health Organization developed a list of 'best buys' and other recommended interventions to address NCDs and specifically the four key risk factors highlighted above².

How Malawi is progressing in incorporating WHO best buys

In addition to an already big strain on the health system caused by communicable diseases such as HIV/ AIDS and tuberculosis, Malawi is struggling to manage the challenge of the growing NCD burden. Other than pressure on the health system, these diseases also burden society through prolonged disability, by diminishing resources within families and reducing productivity. The WHO best buys provide a good option for countries like Malawi facing premature NCD deaths and with limited resources to change their trajectory through strategic investments that have been demonstrated to work and be cost effective².

A study on population level interventions to prevent hypertension and diabetes in sub-Saharan Africa has however established that Malawi's legislation, policies and programmes do not adequately include the WHO best buys³, with little progress since 2017⁴. Malawi has a national policy to regulate alcohol but no existing policies to reduce physical inactivity, reduce unhealthy diet and reduce tobacco use. Further, it has been observed that existing policies have not translated into interventions.

Priority Actions

The NCD and Mental Health Unit Director at The Ministry of Health should

1

Develop a monitoring and evaluation plan to track and assess the performance of priority interventions for NCDs. This will enable necessary improvements to be made.

2

Advocate for The Ministry of Finance, Economic Planning & Development to allocate funds into programs. Policies such as the alcohol policy need to be translated into supportive programs and enabling environments

3

Develop policies for the following NCD Risk factors, diet (salt and trans-fatty acid reduction and sugar sweetening taxation), physical activity and tobacco.

Almost **two-thirds** of non-communicable disease (NCD) deaths are linked to:



Tobacco use



Harmful use of alcohol



Unhealthy eating



Physical inactivity

Implications

Reduced economic burden from NCDs

NCDs have an impact on both population health and national budgets. If intervention efforts remain static or slow as in the case of Malawi, the WHO and World Economic Forum estimate annual losses of US\$25 per person in low income countries. If a core set of best buy interventions were to be scaled up however, the annual investment will amount to less than US\$1 per person in low income countries ⁵.

Beyond the national budget, costs to families and individuals can be catastrophic and in rural Malawi, chronic NCDs were observed to push families into poverty⁶. Cost effectiveness is among the criteria for selection of best buys and in a resource limited country such as Malawi, they would be an appropriate intervention ².

Investments in best-buys can be classified as self-sustaining as taxation on alcohol, sugar and cigarettes has the potential to generate revenue for the government. Other economic benefits come from increased productivity and greater contribution to economic growth.

Reduction of morbidity and mortality from NCDs.

The return on investment in health terms will be the avoidance of premature deaths caused by NCDs. The WHO progress monitor indicates that there's a 23% probability of premature mortality resulting from NCDs in Malawi so scaling up of NCD interventions is vital. The COVID-19 pandemic has further amplified the issue, leaving more people vulnerable to the impacts of NCDs.

Ultimately, many risk factors for NCDs are driven by public policy choices which influence the decisions people make and there is therefore need for the Malawi government to invest in these interventions.

1. Noncommunicable diseases progress monitor 2022. Geneva: WHO 2022
2. 'Best buys' and other recommended interventions for the prevention and control of noncommunicable diseases. WHO. 2017.
3. Situational analysis of population level interventions targeting risk factors for diabetes mellitus and hypertension implemented in Rwanda, Malawi and South Africa: A desk review
4. Lupafya et al Implementation of Policies and Strategies for Control of Noncommunicable Diseases in Malawi: Challenges and Opportunities.
5. Wang et al. The economic burden of chronic non-communicable diseases in rural Malawi: an observational study. (2016)
6. Bloom et al. "From Burden to "Best Buys": Reducing the Economic Impact of Non-Communicable Disease in Low- and Middle-Income Countries," 2011

Key Findings

1 Malawi is lagging behind in adopting the WHO best buy recommendations and has not made progress in the past 5 years

2 Malawi's National Health Promotion Policy and a National Sports Policy is not supported by a national physical activity program.

3 Malawi has not assented to the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control which aims to protect populations from the dangers of tobacco smoke.

4 Malawi's alcohol policy does not provide details on strategies for addressing alcohol as a risk factor for NCDs

5 No policies promoting reduction of salt intake, sugar sweetened beverages or trans-fatty acids. Nutrition policies mainly focus on undernutrition