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ISSUE:	Measures to Strengthen the Facilities of Developing Small Island States in Addressing Their Health Challenges
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Introduction

Small Island Developing States (SIDS) face unique and pressing health challenges that significantly impact their populations. These challenges come from geographic isolation, limited resources, and vulnerability to environmental changes. First, due to their remote location, SIDS may face high import and export costs for goods and irregular international traffic volumes. Yet, due to the narrow resource base, they must rely on external markets for many goods. Also, many



The geographic location of SIDS leads to narrow resource base for medical support

of these islands lack adequate healthcare infrastructure, leading to insufficient medical facilities, a shortage of trained healthcare professionals, and limited access to essential medicines and technologies.

For example, according to a 2019 report by the World Health Organization (WHO), about 50% of people in Pacific SIDS reported having difficulty accessing necessary medical care due to cost and distance. The geographical isolation further complicates the situation, making it difficult for residents to seek specialized medical care and for the islands to receive timely medical supplies and support. Lastly, most small islands already present high burdens of climate-sensitive diseases such as vector-, food-, and water-borne diseases. Climate change will manifest in increased average temperatures and an increased incidence and severity of extreme weather events that will worsen the health risks of SIDS.



Background



Impact of Climate Change on SIDS

Small Island Developing States (SIDS) are a group of low-lying island nations home to approximately 65 million people living across more than 1,000 islands, many of which are in the Caribbean. SIDS's three geographical regions are the Caribbean, the Pacific, the Atlantic, the Indian Ocean, and the South China Sea (AIS). The 39 nations classified as SIDS by the United Nations are among the most affected by these challenges and yet the least responsible for

them. While many of these crises manifest as economic and social threats, the impacts on the health of populations are often neglected. Due to their limited access to essential vaccination and medical care in the coastal area, many SIDS are still recovering from the shocks of the global financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as struggling with accelerating climate change. In addition, their geographical location will significantly impact the people's lives and healthcare.

Problems Raised

Impact of climate change

As a result of their coastal geography, SIDS are particularly vulnerable to climate change. For example, Maldives, an archipelago in the Indian Ocean, face severe threats from rising sea levels. Approximately 80% of its land area is less than one meter above sea level, making it highly vulnerable to flooding and erosion. In addition, climate change undermines the environmental determinants of health: clean air and water, sufficient food and adequate shelter, and can increase the risks of extreme weather events. Although all populations are at risk, some are more vulnerable than others. SIDS is in the front line, encapsulating the range of acute to long-term risks from more extreme floods and storms to increased dangers of water-, vector, and food-borne infectious diseases and other communicable and non-communicable diseases to sea-level rise threatening fragile healthcare facilities, mainly but not exclusively, situated in coastal areas. Most small islands already present high burdens of climate-sensitive diseases such as vector-, food-, and waterborne diseases. Climate change will manifest in increased average temperatures, increased incidences and severity of extreme weather events such as floods, cyclones, storm surges, and drought), sea-level rise, higher fresh-water temperature, and decreased water



and food availability. All these hazards will result in increased mortality and morbidity from extreme weather events (including mental health) and climate-sensitive diseases such as malaria, dengue, cholera, filariasis, leptospirosis, schistosomiasis, and ciguatera fish poisoning. Sea-level rise will threaten the very existence of some SIDS. Furthermore, there is robust evidence showing how climate-related processes originating in other countries pose serious health risks to SIDS. These include air-borne dust, the spread of aquatic pathogens, the invasion of plant and animal species, and distant-source ocean swells from mid to high latitudes.

Unhealthy diet

Due to their isolated location, SIDS imports large amounts of primarily ultra-processed foods and sugar-sweetened beverages, contributing to the high and increasing prevalence of obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular diseases. Commercial drives of unhealthy diets have contributed to the dramatic and continuing increase in the prevalence of obesity, enabled by the macroeconomic and policy environment. As a result, In the Caribbean, more than half of the adults are overweight, and the prevalence of obesity increased from 15 to 25% since 2000. The situation seems even bleak in the Pacific Islands: in the chart Prevalence of Overweight and Obesity in 2016, the top 10 countries are all Pacific islands, falling in the range of 75-85%.

Country	Obesity prevalence	% deaths from major NCDs	% risk of premature deaths from major NCDs	Breast-milk substitutes code implemented	WHO marketing recommendations implemented	Taxes on sugar sweetened beverages
Barbados	33.2%	83%	16%	No	No	Yes
Dominica	25.9%	—	—	No	No	Yes
Jamaica	26.8%	79%	15%	No	No	No
Fiji	35.9%	93%	10%	Yes	No, but draft legislation on advertising	Yes
Nauru	45.1%	—	—	—	No	Yes
Tonga	41.1%	81%	24%	—	No	Yes

Country noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) profiles in a study of regulatory measures to fight obesity in Small Island Developing States

Moreover, access to healthy food with the required minimum quantity of fresh fruits and vegetables and a concomitant healthy lifestyle remains an obvious policy priority, for which the SIDS will have to work hard given their many constraints. Natural conditions present hard constraints to raising the supply of fresh food products. SIDS are ‘ocean-locked’, their cultivable land is limited and generally of low suitability for high-input agriculture. The effects of ongoing intersectoral policy interventions in small island states require greater priority and sustained effort to reduce food insecurity, address vulnerabilities of these countries, and halt the increase in obesity-related non-communicable diseases (NCDs). To cope with the issue regarding unhealthy diets and obesity, Several SIDS have introduced policies to combat obesity. In 2016, Barbados implemented a 10% tax on sugar-sweetened beverages, resulting in a reduction in the purchase of these drinks by 4.3% in the following year.

International Actions

Scaling up multi-sector actions on NCDs and mental health

Barbados' Government, the World Health Organization (WHO), and the Pan American Health Organization recently convened a high-level technical meeting to address noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) and mental health in Small Island Developing States (SIDS). The meeting centered on reviewing progress, addressing challenges, and exploring opportunities to enhance multi-sectoral efforts on NCDs and mental health while formulating recommendations to save lives and improve well-being. During the meeting, countries highlighted key recommendations to intensify efforts on NCDs and mental health to meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) target of reducing premature mortality from NCDs and suicide by one-third before 2030. These recommendations encompass concrete steps to enhance collaboration for early detection, prevention, and management of NCDs and mental health issues across SIDS; fortifying health systems in light of the climate crisis and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic; promoting health and preventing NCDs, mainly focusing on combating obesity; ensuring sustainable and adequate resources (both financial and human) for NCDs and mental health; and enhancing health information systems.

Strengthening disaster risk reduction and early warnings

A major international conference in Antigua and Barbuda has agreed on a new plan of action to build the resilience of small islands in tackling the world's most pressing challenges and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. This includes strengthening disaster risk reduction and early warnings. The Fourth International Conference on Small Island Developing States (SIDS4) agreed on a



Early Warnings for All (EW4ALL)

lengthy conference declaration with a roadmap to build resilient economies and a secure future, foster safe, healthy, and prosperous societies, and promote environmental protection and planetary sustainability in the face of climate change. It agreed on the need to mainstream disaster risk reduction and strengthen disaster preparedness, "including multi-hazard early warning systems and capacity to take early action, through initiatives such as the Early Warnings for All (EW4ALL) and the Climate Risk Early Warning Systems (CREWS), timely evacuation planning, planning for relocation of communities, and developing post-disaster needs assessments."



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Key Players

World Health Organization

The World Health Organization (WHO), being the most significant health organization in the United Nations, recently hosted the global meeting of leaders focusing solely on health in Small Island Developing States (SIDS). The SIDS Summit for Health convened SIDS heads of state, health ministers, and other stakeholders to address the pressing health challenges and needs unique to these nations. The summit aims to amplify the



WHO helping SIDS with plantation

voices of SIDS, foster collaborative efforts, and enhance partnerships and financing for health and development. Key anticipated outcomes of the summit include the mobilization of targeted funding and partnerships, as well as the issuance of a joint statement outlining priority short-term actions. These actions will involve advancing existing health initiatives and contributing to achieving results at major upcoming events such as the UN Food Systems Summit in September 2021, the 26th Climate Change Conference in November 2021, the Nutrition for Growth Summits in December 2021, and beyond.

Caribbean Public Health Agency

The Caribbean Public Health Agency (CARPHA) is among the three multinational public health agencies globally, offering services such as public health surveillance, emergency response, laboratory, information, research, training, and policy development. These services benefit a diverse population of 17 million individuals across 24 English, French, and Dutch-speaking member states and territories. CARPHA has demonstrated leadership and innovation by, for instance, promoting child obesity prevention in the economic sector through a six-point policy package aimed at creating healthier food environments. Additionally, CARPHA has highlighted climate change as a significant regional public health threat to small island developing states. In June 2018, CARPHA inaugurated the International Agency for Research on Cancer Caribbean Cancer Registry Hub for its member states.

Possible Solutions

Establishment of Proper Healthcare system



Health system capacity is a prerequisite for healthy children, adults, and human capital. However, the WHO has identified 11 SIDS as having critical health workforce gaps and in need of ethical migration measures and protections from active international health worker recruitment. Skills shortages exist for midwives and nurses, hampering access to quality sexual, reproductive, maternal, newborn, and adolescent health, NCD, and mental health services. Other SIDS have vulnerable supply and absorption capacities and a persistent challenge in recruiting healthcare workers. Therefore, SIDS is in desperate need of establishing a proper healthcare system that will have sufficient healthcare workers to cover diverse health needs and care, reducing as many health challenges as possible.



WHO helping with healthcare in SIDS

Improvement in Infrastructure development

Due to climate change, natural hazards represent the most significant challenge to SIDS' drive towards sustainable development. Ninety percent of SIDS are positioned in tropical areas, where they are at high risk of experiencing extreme weather events, which have a significant impact on their vulnerable health facilities and community infrastructure. Therefore, investing in improving infrastructure development to retrofit health facilities to community settings such as retrofitting of hospitals with solar power and storm-resistance infrastructure that are both energy efficient and resilient to climate-induced disasters is crucial. For example, installing photovoltaic (PV) solar panels on the roofs of hospitals and health clinics can provide sustainable and uninterrupted power supply, which can be crucial during and after extreme weather events when power outages are common.

Glossary

Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs)

The term NCDs refers to a group of conditions that are not mainly caused by an acute infection, result in long-term health consequences and often create a need for long-term treatment and care. These conditions include cancers, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and chronic lung illnesses.

Early Warnings for All (EW4ALL)

The Early Warnings for All Initiative (EW4ALL) aims to ensure universal protection from hazardous weather, water or climate events through life-saving Early Warning Systems by the end of 2027.

Climate Risk Early Warning Systems

The Climate Risk and Early Warning Systems (CREWS) initiative is a financial mechanism which funds projects in the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and Small Island Developing States (SIDS) to establish risk-informed early warning services

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