

WCC observes World Health Day as WHO releases first global report on diabetes

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World Health Day, 7 April, is focusing this year on diabetes. The World Health Organization (WHO) has released its first Global Report on Diabetes, which reveals that the number of adults living with diabetes has almost quadrupled since 1980 to 422 million, or 8.5% of the world's adult population.

In 2012 alone, diabetes caused 1.5 million deaths. Complications linked to diabetes can lead to heart attack, stroke, blindness, kidney failure and lower limb amputation. Obesity has been the biggest factor behind this dramatic rise.

Responding to the report, Prof Isabel Phiri, associate general secretary of the World Council of Churches (WCC), called on faith communities, congregations, and church-related institutions to promote healthy dietary habits and physical activity to help people avoid excessive weight gain. "Let us ensure that our faith communities provide supportive environments in shaping people's choices of foods by limiting fats and sugars and increasing consumption of fruit and vegetables, as well as legumes, whole grains, and nuts. Let us also encourage regular physical activity as part of our daily routine. The body is the temple of God. Let us take care of our bodies. Let us, as people of faith, help each other that we can become a fit and faithful community."

Diabetes is a serious, chronic disease, characterized by elevated blood glucose occurring either when the body does not produce enough of the enzyme insulin (type 1) or when the body cannot effectively use the insulin it produces (type 2). Diabetes is one of the four most common non-communicable diseases (along with heart disease and stroke, cancer and chronic lung disease). Tobacco use, unhealthy diets, physical inactivity and harmful use of alcohol can lead to higher instances of diabetes. While the

exact causes of type 1 diabetes are unknown, in type 2, the risk is determined by genetic and metabolic factors, and obesity and physical inactivity are the strongest risk factors. Fetal and early childhood nutrition affect future risk.

Obesity is increasing dramatically in the world. In 2014, one in three adults was overweight, and one in ten adults were obese. Once considered a problem only in high-income countries, obesity is now dramatically on the rise in low- and middle-income countries, particularly in urban settings.

While the economic impact of diabetes is catastrophic, with the annual direct cost of diabetes globally estimated at US\$ 827 billion, the food and beverage industry make huge profits from people's unhealthy eating and drinking habits. Evidence shows that effective taxation on sugar-sweetened beverages and curbing the marketing of unhealthy foods, bring significant health and economic benefits to society. Scandinavian countries have had such taxes for many years, and in 2012, France and Hungary joined the list of inspired nations, followed by Mexico in 2014. South Africa and the UK will start imposing taxes on sugar-sweetened beverages from 2017 and 2018 respectively.

Prof Dr. Henk Jochemsen, a member of the International Reference Group of the WCC-Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance (WCC-EAA), said, "We, as faith communities, have to hold all our nations accountable to adopt effective taxation on sugar-sweetened beverages and to curbing the marketing of unhealthy foods. It is critical that countries implement legal instruments to produce policy outcomes, for achieving the goals of public health. The money generated from such taxation should also be invested in a transparent manner to promote public health."

Dr. Manoj Kurian, coordinator of WCC-EAA, expressed concern that the food system is being rigged against the poor – so diet is often not a choice. "In a world where hundreds of millions go undernourished while half a billion suffer from obesity, corporate-based approaches have led to an artificial separation of nutrition and sustainable food systems, resulting in silos of technical and product-based solutions that ignore social, economic, political, environmental, health and cultural determinants," he said.

The WCC works in the field of food security through the WCC-EAA and its global campaign "Food for Life."

Along with the priority of early detection and treatment of complications, there is currently a significant challenge in accessing affordable insulin. People with type 1 diabetes require insulin for survival. People with type 2 diabetes often need insulin.

Low-income countries pay most for insulin while high- and middle-income countries pay least.

Rev. Nyambura Njoroge, who guides WCC's health and healing work, said, "It is unacceptable that only 23% of low-income countries have insulin available for the people who need it. Diabetes is becoming more common, even in the poorest nations. Faith-based health providers need to work collaboratively with governments and international organizations to increase awareness, capacity and resources available for early detection and treatment of diabetes."

The WCC is committed to ensuring the holistic and comprehensive discussion and action around the threats that communities face due to diabetes and other non-communicable diseases.

At the Ecumenical Centre in Geneva, on World Health Day, various activities will be held including a quiz, discussions on food at the cafeteria and the promotion of diabetes screening in association with the WHO, University Hospital Geneva, and the Geneva Diabetes Association.

[Food for Life Campaign](#)

[WCC Health and Healing programme](#)

[World Health Organization](#)

[Food and Nutrition Watch](#)