Winners and Losers in the Political Declaration

On the Sept. 27, the third High-Level Meeting on noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) will bring together political leaders from around the world, including an expected 59 heads of state. The most formal outcome of the meeting will be a vote on a political declaration meant to spur action at the country level on NCDs. Because it is also intended as a global consensus document on health priorities to guide country policies, practices and investments, the political declaration is subject to enormous pressure from various and vested interests.

The final draft of the declaration was released on Sept. 19 and we have pored through its pages of technical language to identify the public health winners and losers.

Losers

- **Tobacco Control.** While the implementation of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control treaty (FCTC) is mentioned, tobacco taxes and other WHO-endorsed, effective interventions for tobacco are not. The language in the document shifts the responsibility away from policy interventions and toward informed choices by individuals, yet data show that population-level reductions in tobacco use have only been delivered through strong tobacco control policies.

- **Obesity Prevention.** The declaration has vague language on policies for obesity prevention. It focuses on “empowering individuals to make healthy choices” instead of advancing government action toward the implementation of proven interventions. It invites industry to create its own policies to reduce the exposure and impact on children from the marketing of unhealthy foods and beverages high in fats and sugar, rather than emphasizing government policies or regulation.

- **Alcohol Policy.** Again, the declaration includes vague language on policies and a focus on “empowering individuals to make healthy choices,” which is unlikely to guide governments towards prioritizing the most effective interventions. Again, the declaration invites industry to take a lead on protecting minors from the marketing of unhealthy commodities, rather than emphasizing government policies or regulation.

- **Heart Disease.** The declaration contains vague language on policies and focuses on “empowering individuals to make healthy choices,” once again missing an opportunity to endorse specific, wide-reaching, population-wide policies. Again, the declaration invites industry to take a lead on reducing children’s exposure to marketing of unhealthy commodities, rather than emphasizing government policies or regulation.

- **Best Buys.** The well-known WHO interventions are not mentioned in the document, though there is compromise wording calling for their near
equivalent: “a set of cost-effective, affordable, evidence-based interventions and good practices as recommended by WHO.” The Best Buys are important as they are concrete, inexpensive, simple actions – like taxing tobacco or soda – that countries can take to reduce NCDs.

- **Affordable Medicines.** The Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) essentially governs the availability of low-cost, generic essential drugs and was the most controversial and difficult issue on which to find consensus throughout the process. The TRIPS language on trade and essential medicines is weak, mirroring agreements on tuberculosis and malaria favoring profits over easier access to medicines that save lives.

- **Resources for NCDs.** There is no mention of sustainability, scaling up or smart financing of work to reduce NCDs. And no mention of how fiscal policies, such as taxes, can help finance this work and universal health coverage.

**Winners**

- **Environmental Health.** In a first for an NCD political declaration, there is a strong discussion of the need for action on environmental issues including indoor and outdoor air pollution.

- **Mental Health.** The issue of mental health is highlighted throughout the document, suggesting that this issue will get more attention from the international development community in the years to come.

- **Universal Health Coverage.** There are a considerable number of references to strengthening and reorienting health systems towards the achievement of universal health coverage, a WHO priority.

- **Marketers.** The declaration contains limited calls for restrictions on the marketing of unhealthy foods and sugary beverages to children and youth, and there is no call for an international code of conduct on marketing, nor an accountability mechanism. This will impede progress in addressing the commercial determinants of preventable disease.

**Mixed Result**

- **Industry.** Unfortunately, commercial interests also had a victory. The declaration invites industry to help prevent, control and treat NCDs. The emphasis throughout the document is on “empowering individuals to make smart choices” and not on regulation, legislation or other population-wide interventions to deter consumption of unhealthy products. Voluntary schemes proposed by industry and its involvement in health policy formation are consistently found to benefit industry profits rather than health. On the other hand, for the first time the political declaration includes specific language on managing “conflicts of interest” when working with private sector.

That’s our assessment – let us know what you think. Tweet @VitalStrat with your input.