



## **UN Statement on Triple Burden of Disease 11<sup>th</sup> Round Table Meeting, Thimphu, September 01, 2011**

***To be read by Dr. Nani Nair, Representative, WHO***

### **[Commendable Progress ]**

In recent decades, Bhutan has indeed made laudable progress in several health indicators. This is attributable to both consistent investments in public health and overall socio-economic development.

High immunization coverage has led to a notable decrease in vaccine preventable diseases like measles and to zero reporting of poliomyelitis since 1986. The significant declines in maternal, infant and under-five mortality, and in cases and deaths due to major communicable diseases such as tuberculosis and malaria, are indeed commendable successes in public health.

### **[Contemporary Challenges]**

Bhutan is undergoing rapid transition in many spheres. This is now levying what could be referred to as “a triple burden on health”, (*that is to say communicable diseases, non-communicable diseases, and impact on health consequent to climate change and natural disasters*).

While the country is yet to fully address the burden of communicable diseases, non-communicable diseases have steadily risen at the same time and now account for 75% of the reported burden of disease. Due to lifestyle changes and urbanization, NCDs like hypertension, diabetes, and cardiovascular diseases are increasingly posing bigger challenges to the health of people in their most productive years. [*Both the poor who lack knowledge and access to adequate healthy food, and the richer urbanite with easy access to unhealthy foods are at a higher risk of NCDs.*]

Adding to this double burden of communicable and non-communicable diseases, is a third posed by natural disasters, climate and environmental changes that pose the threats of acute health emergencies and pandemics. [*The surge in malaria cases is a reflection of this reality.*]

Furthermore, the mid-term review of the 10th five year plan has highlighted the heightened vulnerability of adolescents and young people to substance abuse, early pregnancies, HIV/AIDS and STIs. [*Among young women, 15% are reported to have given birth before the age of 18 years.*] With the decline in under-5 mortality, curbing neonatal mortality now calls for greater attention. We are also acutely aware that one out of three children, mostly from among the rural-poor are stunted in their growth due to chronic malnutrition. These are worrying trends, given the youthful demographic profile of Bhutan.

### **[The Way Forward]**

This calls for a close analysis of options against the backdrop of on-going health and development initiatives, efforts to decentralize services to afford greater access, and the increasing costs of health

care. Ensuring optimal health for all people is enshrined in GNH as being imperative for national development.

Two points are key in this context. The rising cost of health care requires attention to achieving an optimal balance between investments in cost-effective public health interventions [*such as breast feeding, immunization and promotion of healthy lifestyles,*] and the necessary but more expensive investments in medical care and treatment.

A second point is the multi-sectoral nature of health. Education, water and sanitation, agriculture [*and animal husbandry*], urban development, culture and environmental protection all have an active role to play, alongside the Ministry of Health, in promoting and protecting the health of the people. Health therefore necessarily needs to be considered as core in all of Bhutan's development policies.

The National Health Policy was recently launched following endorsement by the Cabinet. We as UN agencies in Bhutan renew our commitment to enhancing health services under the leadership of the Ministry of Health. Our collective and core work [*in supporting key health initiatives*] will continue to include: cost-effective health interventions; promoting healthy lifestyles; strengthening the national health system enhancing human resource capacity; enhancing health information management and dissemination, and helping to monitor health targets.

We also regard our efforts to build partnerships with the international community as important in contributing in the context of GNH, to the achievement of the national health and Millennium Development Goals. We thank all donor and development partners whose contributions have helped to support various health initiatives in Bhutan so far.

We trust that the UN High Level Meeting on non-communicable diseases in September this year will bring greater commitment and resources to address major health concerns globally and in Bhutan.