

Statement by Amref Health Africa at UN High-Level Meeting

Panel on NCDs, Mental Health and Wellbeing Through Multi-sectoral Governance



Excellencies, distinguished delegates, and fellow advocates. We speak today for the 800 million young Africans whose health and futures depend on whether we finally recognise mental health as inseparable from non-communicable diseases (NCDs).

We affirm the commitment of the UN General Assembly and the Heads of State to address a reality we can no longer ignore, that the world is alarmingly off track in the prevention and control of NCDs.

Noting with concern that hidden within this crisis is the burden of largely unmet mental needs amongst young people across the globe. Even more so in Africa, where we are witnessing compounded disease and environmental burdens. The mental health and well-being of people is inextricably linked to their physical well-being. Therefore, when 23-year-old Sarah from Blantyre manages her diabetes, she's also battling climate anxiety because Cyclone Freddy wasn't too long ago. This depression can make medication adherence quite difficult for her. When young farmers in rural Ghana face climate-induced crop failures and food insecurity, their stress can manifest as hypertension, substance use and malnutrition-related NCDs. For too long, we have treated mental health as separate from NCDs, despite overwhelming evidence of their interconnection. This artificial separation is costing lives and undermining every NCD programme we implement.

Reiterating the evidence: that depression doubles the risk of developing diabetes and increases cardiovascular mortality by 50%. Anxiety disorders triple the likelihood of hypertension. People with severe mental illness die 15-20 years earlier, primarily from preventable NCDs. Yet our NCD strategies largely ignore mental health, and our mental health services operate in isolation.

Recognising the compounding pressures on Africa's Youth: Young Africans face a perfect storm of NCD and mental health risk factors that include: Urbanisation stress driving both lifestyle-related NCDs and anxiety disorders.

Youth unemployment (*affecting 60% in some regions*) creates depression that worsens chronic disease management. Digital connectivity brings both opportunities and mental health challenges that manifest as physical symptoms. Climate change impacts, including food insecurity, displacement, and eco-anxiety, compound both NCD risk and psychological distress.

And Social inequality creates chronic stress that literally changes cardiovascular and metabolic health.

These aren't separate epidemics requiring separate responses - they are interconnected challenges demanding integrated solutions and the optimisation of our public health systems. We govern in silos. Our people suffer in wholeness.

We therefore call for three urgent shifts:

- 1. Integration by design:** Every NCD strategy must embed mental health screening, treatment, and support as core components — not as optional add-ons. Countries should establish integrated governance structures by 2025.
- 2. Financing for interconnected realities:** Development partners must end the false economy of treating conditions separately and instead fund comprehensive approaches that address the social and environmental determinants of both NCDs and mental health.
- 3. Workforce transformation:** We must train health workers for integrated care and measure outcomes that reflect the true interconnected nature of these conditions.

Excellencies, integration will save both lives and resources. This Political Declaration presents a historic opportunity to act decisively, to embrace the evidence, to dismantle silos, and build health systems worthy of the 21st century challenges we face. Africa's youth, and the world's future, demand nothing less.

Thank you!