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WHO Global strategy on diet, physical activity and health – comments from Norway

Pursuant to the consideration by the Executive Board in January last, and with reference to your letter dated 28 January, please find below the comments from Norway to the draft Global strategy on diet, physical activity and health.

Norway congratulates the WHO Secretariat for the excellent work with the Global strategy on diet, physical activity and health, including the efforts to ensure transparency.

Norway would like to express its full support to the WHO draft Global strategy on diet, physical activity and health as presented to the Executive Board's 113th session.

Norway finds the Global strategy timely and important. Norway looks forward to the adoption of the Strategy by the World Health Assembly in May 2004 and to its effective implementation.

Norway agrees with the background of the Global strategy: The threat is substantial and the public health potential of sound diet and physical activity is great. Due to the increasingly international and global characteristics of the problems, international collaboration is needed. WHO's global leadership and support to the efforts of Member States is sincerely welcome.

Norway supports a strong Global strategy and is generally very pleased with the draft. The Strategy is very much in line with the Norwegian White paper No. 16 to the Storting (2002-2003) "Prescriptions for a Healthier Norway. A broad policy for public health". This policy document gives emphasis to physical activity and diet as important parts of the overall public health policy. The rationale for this policy is internationally acknowledged evidence in addition to our own experience in promoting healthier diets and lifestyles. A sustained and comprehensive national nutrition and food policy for three decades has led to generally healthier diets and substantially reduced rates of cardiovascular diseases. The Norwegian experience,

very much in line with the proposed Strategy and documented in international health literature, provides strong evidence to the proposed Global strategy.

At the same time Norway wants to emphasize that, in spite of the mentioned progress, more work is also needed in our country to have further progress in promoting healthy diets and physical activity, to prevent obesity, diabetes, cancer and cardiovascular diseases. In our national work the WHO Global strategy will be of great support.

Concerning the scientific base of the Strategy, Norway, while recognizing that science in principle develops continuously, finds the evidence a strong and firm base for the needed action. The WHO/FAO 916 report (2003) is in full agreement with the Nordic recommendations on diet and nutrition. Furthermore, the Global strategy gives a policy framework to implement in Member States the nutrient and food based recommendations that have been nationally agreed upon. In Norway the goals are to at least double the intake of fruit and vegetables, reduce the intake of fat, mainly saturated fatty acids, and reduce intake of sugar, especially among young children. We also recommend all children to be physically active at least 1 hour per day. For adults the general recommendation is a minimum of 30 minutes physical activity per day. Additional activity will improve the health even more.

Norway agrees on the importance of individual responsibility, but emphasizes that public strategies and actions are needed to create a health promoting environment that makes the healthy choices easier. This is especially important for children. Parents, school authorities and other adults have the responsibility to educate the children but also to create a healthy environment. In health promotion and public health policy both incentives and restrictive measures are needed, in a sound balance. Norway finds the proposed Global strategy to be balanced, giving ample scope for Member States to adapt measures according to national circumstances.

Norway supports the Strategy's reference to Codex Alimentarius. In this regard, Norway would like to refer to the World Health Assembly resolution WHA 56.23, paragraph 2 (2), which "urges Member States to make full use of Codex standards for the protection of human health throughout the food chain, including assistance with making healthy choices regarding nutrition and diet".

The Strategy also touches upon challenging issues as taxation, pricing and subsidies. Norway considers it appropriate to mention these options, as they constitute possible tools available for policymakers in their efforts to make it easy for people to choose healthy foods. Norway regards the proposed text to be accurate and well balanced.

Norway recognizes that there is an urgent need for a Global strategy on diet and physical activity, addressing the growing and strong need to help control the chronic diseases which affect developing countries increasingly hard. It should be emphasized that the proposed Strategy, when successfully applied, will also help reduce many deficiencies and add to overall sound nutrition policies. The Strategy does not address hunger, undernutrition and micronutrient deficiencies; issues that are among the most important challenges for the global community and linked to the broader issue of poverty, development and health which WHO also in the future must continue to address as a matter of priority. This point could be addressed in the introduction to the Strategy.

Once more, Norway expresses its recognition for the work done by the WHO in health promotion. Norway will also in the future be happy to be involved in the work of WHO to promote healthy diet, physical activity and healthy lifestyles for prevention and control of chronic diseases and promotion of public health.

Please remain assured of our best wishes and anticipations of a successful World Health Assembly in May.

Yours sincerely,

Sveinung Røren
Deputy Director General