

Scaling up Non-Communicable Diseases Prevention and Control Actions: The Need for Empowering Youth in the Pacific Region

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Introduction

It is well recognized that youth have the potential to take a leadership role in promoting health and population wellbeing.¹ Empowering youth to advocate for practicing healthy lifestyles is key to prevention and control of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as heart disease, diabetes, cancer, and chronic lung disease, as youth have significant potential to reach and influence their peers and wider populations through their networks and creativity. This article highlights the Pacific youth's engagement in raising awareness on the growing burden of NCDs and the call for more targeted investment to empower youth's capacity to scale up NCDs prevention and control actions.

NCDs in the Pacific Region

In the Pacific Island countries and territories (PICTs), NCDs cause approximately 75% of deaths and majority are premature.² Most NCD risk factors including poor eating habits, lack of physical activity, tobacco use, and alcohol consumption begin in childhood. Globally, the majority of premature NCD deaths are associated with childhood behaviors that are exacerbated in adulthood.³ Over 20% of students aged 13-15 years in the Cook Islands, French Polynesia, Niue, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Wallis and Futuna are obese; approximately 25-35% of youth aged 13-35 years in Samoa, Wallis and Futuna and Kiribati are current smokers; and around 80-90% of youth in Samoa and Niue have their first alcoholic drink by age 14.⁴ In the adult population aged 20-79 years, PICTs are among the top 10 countries with the highest rate of diabetes in the world.⁵ This poses a considerable challenge to achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 3: Good health and well-being.⁶

Youth in the Pacific Region

Across the 22 PICTs in the region with a total population of 10 million people, more than half of the population are under the age of 25 with 18% of them aged between 15 and 24 years.⁷ By 2050, the 15–24 year old population will reach middle age or older and be 3 times as likely than younger age groups to be at risk for NCDs.⁷ Unless urgent action is taken, this large young population will be burdened by NCDs from preventable lifestyle behaviors that are on the rise. The youth in the Pacific region have the potential to curb the rise in NCDs by positioning themselves at the forefront of the NCDs prevention and control with opportunities to advocate for and become ambassadors for healthy change in their communities.

Regional Effort in Empowering Youth to Address NCDs

Evidence has shown the success of engaging youth in addressing NCDs. For example, study in Indonesia demonstrated that a community program can be improved by empowering school students towards better healthy habits to prevent NCDs,⁸ and a Canadian study showed that increasing knowledge of diabetes risk factors in South Asian population improved health behaviors.⁹ Recognizing the role of youth, the Pacific Community (SPC – the principal scientific and technical organization in the Pacific region) has been leading in implementing the “Wake Up: Engaging Youth to address NCDs” regional initiative in collaboration with PICTs.¹⁰ This initiative engages and trains youth to improve knowledge on NCDs prevention and control, and communication techniques to raise NCDs awareness through the creative arts. These arts provide a platform for new perspectives expressed through different mediums such as film, painting, mural, freehand drawing, photography, and lyrical composition. This initiative has been implemented since 2017 and engages hundreds of youth from PICTs. It was adapted

from the peer-to-peer education principle, evidence based NCD behavior change interventions, and global NCD best buys (ie, proven NCD interventions that are most cost effective).¹¹ Based on the preliminary findings of the evaluation of effectiveness, this initiative has resulted in improved understanding of NCD risk factors in the Pacific region and empowering youth to address them; strengthened skills in both public health and media communication using creative arts; and enhanced awareness of the influence and attractiveness of social media to promote population health.

Regional Effort to Local Actions

This regional initiative enables trained young individuals to design local NCD awareness campaigns. For example, in 2020, trained youth groups from Fiji, Vanuatu, and Tonga designed and implemented innovative NCD awareness and health promotion campaigns using multimedia technology and artworks in their home countries. Fiji and Tonga youth groups led a series of practical training workshops using different artworks (ie, drawing, painting, filming, etc) to raise awareness on NCDs in different communities. Approximately 80 community members of different age groups participated. Vanuatu trained youth partnered with a grassroot civil society group and organized an “NCDs Mural and Fun Day” through a week-long training workshop using mural arts to raise NCDs awareness. Hundreds of high school students and community members participated in this event.

These local actions promoted community engagement across lifespan. The impact on health outcome takes time to observe change; however, these initiatives demonstrated successful community outreach, improved knowledge, and increased awareness on NCDs. This has also enabled the trained youth to strengthen their own skills and abilities in taking on a lead role in community health promotion campaigns. The enthusiastic involvement of youth has been a major contributor to its success in community outreach.

The Need for Expanding Youth Empowerment

Addressing NCDs through the government and society has been advocated through high-level declarations;¹² however, actions have been slow at the national and community levels. Government ministries are now focused on the impacts and demands of COVID-19 using existing limited resources especially human resources. This highlights the value of having a well-coordinated support system to fully utilize the capacity that exists with youth to greatly contribute to achieving the region’s health goals.¹³

Although some youth in PICTs have started to engage in raising NCDs awareness through regional and national initiatives in the past 5 years, many still have limited leadership, capacity, and resources to effectively combat NCDs in their communities. There is a need to empower and amplify youth engagement in the effort to halt and reverse the Pacific NCDs crisis,¹⁴ by investing additional resources to build up their capacity and motivating them to lead in NCD awareness and health promoting campaigns. It is of utmost importance to ensure young people acquire skills in the field of health promotion, and to provide future employment opportunities through learned art skills.

Conclusion

Today’s youth are enthused to lead on issues that affect their communities and countries. The Pacific youth have demonstrated new perspectives through their innovative approaches in addressing NCDs to other youth and the wider community. To sustain youth engagement in the Pacific, commitment from political leaders and development partners to invest in empowering youth is crucial. Engaging youth and mobilizing them in a collaborative approach is vital to tackle the growing burden of NCDs in a whole of society approach to achieving the United Nations SDGs 3: Good health and well-being, target 3.4: By 2030, reduce by one third premature mortality from NCDs.⁶

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