Diabetes and climate change: two interconnected global challenges

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Against the backdrop of the 65th World Health Assembly in Geneva, the International Diabetes Federation (IDF) and the private health insurance company, Bupa, convened an expert dialogue on two of the most urgent challenges of the 21st century: the global diabetes epidemic and climate change. Both are global phenomena, and have been identified separately as threatening to derail human development and economic growth; both are rapidly accelerating and are fuelled by changes in the way we live and work; both are impacting on all countries – with no government having these challenges under control; and both will have intergenerational effects on the health, wellbeing and security of future generations.

Connections between the two issues, and approaches capable of jointly mitigating their risks and repercussions, has been missing from policy dialogue.

Where are the links?
Type 2 diabetes and climate change are directly and indirectly interconnected. The direct connections refer to how type 2 diabetes and climate change adversely impact on each other. For example, climatic extremes such as drought, disasters and long periods of extreme heat increase people's exposure to diabetes risk factors because traditional food supplies are damaged and opportunities for physical activity are curtailed. Starvation among pregnant women may even set the scene for type 2 diabetes in their children. Meanwhile, people with established diabetes suffer adverse health outcomes or are left without access to essential medicines because of weakened health systems.

The indirect connections refer to the common global forces and trends that are fuelling both of these disasters. For example, patterns of rapid urbanization and fast-changing demographics, and global food industry practices are contributing to high-carbon obesogenic environments. Combined, the direct and indirect links form a rationale for an aligned policy agenda.

Collaborating with Bupa
With support from Bupa, IDF has developed a pioneering policy report that will bring these two challenges together. It outlines the interconnections between climate change and diabetes; establishes the benefits of combating two global risks in an integrated policy agenda;
and informs the broader global discussion on health and sustainable development. The report has been developed with support from an informal advisory group including experts in the field of health and the environment. It was this piece of work that provided the basis for the expert dialogue at WHA. The event was co-hosted by Bupa Chairman Alexander Leitch and IDF President-Elect Michael Hirst, and included respected panellists, Ruth Colagiuri, IDF Vice President, George Alleyne, Director-Emeritus of PAHO, Maria Neira of the World Health Organization, and John Tooke, Chairman of Bupa’s medical advisory panel.

We held this dialogue at WHA in order to engage the health policy-makers of the world on these two urgent issues. Consequently, we launched our policy report around the UN Conference on Sustainable Development – also known as Rio+20 – as we believe it provides a useful lens for understanding the broader interconnections between health and environment. Moreover, it supports the case that health must be at the heart of sustainable development. Health is not only a critical outcome of sustainable development; it is a vital precondition to achieving progress across the three pillars of sustainable development - social, economic and environmental. The prevention and treatment of diseases like diabetes represent an opportunity to alleviate human suffering and social inequity, support economic development and lessen the environmental burden of health systems.

At IDF, we believe in protecting and promoting health through effective mutually beneficial policies, working through strategic alliances and partnerships. Our report on diabetes and climate change is further evidence for the end of the era of fragmentation between health and environment, which has prevented us from tackling the root causes driving diabetes and climate change. Our world is interconnected and only joint action will prevent human suffering and environmental disaster. Business as usual is no longer an option.