

1st Africa Food Environment Research Network Meeting (FERN 2020) |

FERN2020 Virtual Meeting: November 3 – 5, 2020 | 12:00 GMT – 4:00 GMT (+ 00) each day

Meeting Theme: Connecting Food Environment Researchers across Africa

Virtual Launch

Speech by Professor Kwasi Torpey, Head, Department of Population, Family and Reproductive Health, School of Public Health, University of Ghana.

November 3 2020 Accra, Ghana

Colleagues from the University of Ghana, the MEALS4NCDs Project Investigators, and **Project Advisory Board (which includes The Honourable Member of Parliament, and Member of Parliamentary Select Committee on Health, Hon. Dr. Sebastian Sandaare, Representatives of Ministry of Health, the National Development Planning Commission, Food and Drugs Authority, the United Nations agencies of WHO, and UNICEF, CSOs, and renowned international subject experts from Africa, Australia, Europe, and North America)**, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, Good afternoon. It is an honour to join you today for this very important meeting.

First of all, I would like to thank the MEALS4NCDs project team and stakeholders for their resolve to fight nutrition-related NCDs, not just in Ghana but in Africa. NCDs, as we know affect us all. However, the rate at which they are increasing in sub-Saharan Africa is alarming. A report by the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, Univ. Washington showed that within a 30-yr period [1980--2015], the rate of adult obesity increased by 1,400% in Burkina Faso, and over 500% increase in Ghana, Togo, and Benin. The report further indicates that 8 of the 20 nations in the world with the fastest-rising rates of adult obesity are in Africa.

An urgent and decisive actions against NCDs are needed continentally. Unfortunately, high level continental nutrition and health policies and strategies (e.g. the 2003 Maputo commitments, the 2014 Malabo Declaration the Africa Region Nutrition Strategy 2015-2025, and Agenda 2063 have all focused on ridding the continent of hunger and food insecurity. Overnutrition is not given the attention it deserves. Unless the problem of overnutrition is effectively contained, the visions of Agenda 2025, and Agenda 2063 will remain elusive.

Thus, the need for policy-influencing and policy-impacting evidence, which both local and regional policy makers are able to use to combat NCDs in Africa. Existing policies have mainly been informed by evidence from high income countries (HICs) and have paid little attention to African food environments.

Against this background, the MEALS4NCDs Project and the FERN initiative first, seek to connect researchers in the African sub-region and Global North whose work relate directly or indirectly to improving food environments in low- and middle-income countries, and second to build capacity to generate context-relevant evidence.

Ladies and gentlemen, there are countries that are already doing well in their fight against nutrition-related NCDs. The two things that have been observed to be common to these countries are **existence of context-relevant evidence** and **political commitment**. For example:

- **In Chile** – there are regulations/laws preventing advertising of unhealthy foods on TV directed to children under 14 (or when audience share is >20% children)

- **In Spain** – there is a legislation requiring that kindergartens and schools are free from all advertising
 - **In Argentina**, there is mandatory maximum levels of sodium in various food products.
 - **In South Korea**, zoning laws are being enforced; in what they refer to as ‘Green Food Zones’ (<200m) around schools where they ban the sale of foods (fast food, soda) deemed ‘unhealthy’
 - **In Fiji**, there are reduced taxes on healthy foods – removal of excise duty on imported fruits, vegetables and legumes
 - **Mexico** is implementing a 10% tax on sugary-drinks, 8% tax on unhealthy snack foods;
- In Africa, South Africa has taken the lead -- **South Africa has imposed a 20%** tax or 2.29 cents per gram of sugar in sugar sweetened beverages

All of these actions are important. As Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, DG WHO recently remarked:

“If we are to win the war against premature deaths caused by NCDs, we must also win the battles in our kitchens, shops, supermarkets, restaurants, schools We must make it easier for people to make healthy choices, and harder to make unhealthy choices”

Our duty as researchers is to ensure that we generate the evidence needed to fight this war. Commendably, this is exactly what the MEALS4NCDs project aims to do - **providing Measurement, Evaluation, Accountability and Leadership Support for obesity/NCDs prevention in Africa**. As you have been told, the FERN initiative will facilitate capacity building among researchers to generate these kinds of evidence - policy-influencing food environment research evidence.

On this note, I wish you all a successful meeting, as I declare this laudable initiative officially launched.

Thank you

Merci