

UN adopts the Political Declaration on NCDs and Mental Health: Member States reject paternalism and reaffirm prevention through empowerment

The UN General Assembly has adopted the Political Declaration of the Fourth High-Level Meeting (HLM4) on Non-Communicable Diseases and Mental Health, with only the United States and Argentina voting against. Beyond the celebratory tone adopted by parts of civil society, the final text reflects a significant political choice by Member States: to **move away from paternalistic, one-size-fits-all public health policies and towards a more balanced, evidence-based approach**.

Compared to the original draft promoted by the World Health Organization, **the adopted declaration represents a clear rebalancing. The most prescriptive and coercive elements of the initial proposal were either removed or substantially softened**, signalling a rejection of simplified policy shortcuts that fail to reflect the complexity of non-communicable diseases.

While the document still includes general references to front-of-pack labelling and an excessive taxation approach to alcoholic beverages, **it no longer includes food-related fiscal measures or reformulation incentives that have shown limited effectiveness and unintended consequences, nor does it frame nutrition as the primary or exclusive driver of Non-Communicable and Cardiovascular Diseases**. This correction is essential. Nutrition is one relevant determinant, often estimated at around one quarter of NCD and CVD risk, but the overall burden is shaped by a much broader set of factors, including physical inactivity, mental health, socio-economic conditions, ageing, urbanisation, and lifestyle patterns.

The final declaration explicitly acknowledges this multifactorial reality and recognises that **NCDs cannot be effectively addressed through isolated, punitive measures**. Instead, it emphasises long-term prevention strategies based on education, informed decision-making, and the empowerment of citizens.

This outcome demonstrates that **Member States resisted pressure to adopt rigid, universal solutions driven by simplified narratives rather than by the full body of scientific evidence**. Rather than endorsing coercion, **governments reaffirmed trust in individuals and in their capacity to make responsible choices when provided with accurate information and supportive environments**.

The Declaration is not without its limits. However, it is no longer the doctrinaire and paternalistic text initially proposed. It marks a meaningful shift away from prohibition and towards prevention, grounded in responsibility, freedom of choice, and citizen empowerment.

At Competere, we played an active role throughout the HLM4 process in reinforcing a more balanced understanding of NCDs and in advancing solutions focused on education and empowering citizens. We engaged in the public debate, maintained dialogue with Member States, and put forward concrete policy proposals led by **Prof. Michele Carruba and supported by nearly 180 international scientists**. This work helped counter ineffective policy shortcuts and measures associated with harmful unintended consequences, while reaffirming the importance of critical, evidence-based science beyond ideological approaches.