



INTERNATIONAL
OLYMPIC
COMMITTEE

High-level meeting of the UN General Assembly on the Prevention and Control of Non-communicable Diseases

United Nations, New York, 19 September 2011

Statement by Dr Jacques Rogge, President of the International Olympic Committee

Mr President, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates,

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) conveys its compliments to the General Assembly and is honored to have the opportunity to address you today on our shared commitment to serve humanity through the prevention of non-communicable diseases.

The IOC and the UN work in different but complementary ways toward our common goal of a more peaceful and prosperous world, characterized by respect between nations and people, and respect for our planet. The issue that has brought us together today is of particular concern for the IOC because our Movement was founded on the belief that there is a direct connection between healthy bodies and healthy societies.

Non-communicable diseases are not just a threat to health, they are a threat to the global social and economic fabric that binds us together. NCDs are expected to claim more than 35 million lives this year. If current trends continue, the death toll will climb to more than 41 million in just four more years. The impact of NCDs goes well beyond the lives lost and the daily suffering of millions of people. These preventable diseases are a major obstacle to economic growth and social development in countries around the world. Dealing with NCDs is essential if we are to have any hope of achieving the UN Millennium Development Goals.

It should come as no surprise that NCDs inflict the heaviest toll on the developing world. More than 90 percent of the premature deaths from NCDs — victims in their 50s or younger — occur in developing countries. But no region is immune. And the factors that underlie this explosion of NCDs are the same worldwide. Physical inactivity and obesity are near the top of the list. Working in tandem, these slow and silent killers put their victims on a pathway to diabetes, cardiovascular disease, respiratory ailments and certain types of cancers.

Physical inactivity is now recognised as the fourth leading risk factor for global mortality. Obesity is reaching epidemic proportions in some countries. At least 2.6 million people die every year from ailments linked to obesity or excess weight.

It is a grim picture, except for one thing: We can do something about it.

The International Olympic Committee has been working on these issues since its founding well over a century ago. The Olympic Charter, our guiding document, declares that the practice of sport is a human right and directs the IOC to “encourage and support the development of sport for all.” We do that in many ways.

Our premier event, the Olympic Games, are more than just competition for the world’s best athletes. They are a celebration of our common humanity and an inspiration for others to engage in sport and physical activity. The Games give a worldwide audience a chance to share the joy of competition, encouraging millions of young people to emulate their sports heroes. In the host country, the Games leave a legacy of world-class sport venues, a more vibrant sports infrastructure and heightened enthusiasm for sport among the general population.

Our efforts to promote sport and physical activity go well beyond support for elite athletes at the Olympic Games. Many of our initiatives are aimed directly at recreational athletes and young people. The IOC established the Sport for All Commission nearly 30 years ago to support efforts to spread the health and social benefits of regular physical activity with all members of society.

It is worth noting that the commission's mandate speaks of "physical activity," not "sport" or "athletic competition." You do not need to be an Olympian to reap the benefits of physical activity. That spirit of inclusion motivates the Sport for All Commission's successful efforts to promote Olympic Day celebrations.

Olympic Day, which commemorates the founding of our Movement on 23 June 1894, has become a worldwide celebration that typically includes fun runs and other forms of physical activity. Events were held this year in every region of the world, often with the active engagement of our global network of 205 National Olympic Committees.

The Sport for All Commission also hosts high-level conferences with educators, academics, sport administrators, government officials, representatives of UN agencies and other stakeholders to share ideas on ways to encourage physical activity and healthy lifestyles. Our 14th World Conference on Sport for All will open tomorrow in Beijing and one plenary session will be dedicated to "Health and Social Benefits".

In addition, the IOC's Medical Commission is working with leading scientists and experts to take an active role in the promotion of health through sports participation. Only a few weeks ago this Commission published an expert paper titled the "Health and Fitness of Young People through Physical Activity and Sport". The document defines the health consequences of inactivity; it identifies the determinants of sports participation and drop-outs, and provides recommendations on potential solutions and global partnerships. The ultimate purpose of this scientific effort is to improve the health and fitness of young people throughout the world, thereby decreasing the morbidity and mortality deriving from non-communicable diseases.

To get there, it is crucial to translate scientific findings into concrete action on the ground. Concern about youth inactivity and rising obesity rates was one aspect behind our decision to launch the new Youth Olympic Games last year. This event, held every four years in winter and summer, combines sports with educational and cultural activities that encourage healthy lifestyles and cultural understanding – not only aimed at the participants, but also at the many young people following these Games.

The first Youth Olympic Games, held in Singapore in August 2010, attracted 3,500 participants and exceeded expectations. The first Winter Youth Olympic Games will be held in Innsbruck, Austria, in January.

Much of IOC's work to encourage physical activity and healthy lifestyles relies on partnerships. As the United Nations proves every day, collective action by a broad coalition of motivated partners is the most effective way to bring about far-reaching positive change.

The Olympic Youth Development Centre in Zambia is a good example. The centre, a flagship project of the IOC's Sport for Hope programme, opened last year with support from the Zambian government, the National Olympic Committee of Zambia and six international sport federations. In addition to providing access to sports and other physical activity, the facility offers educational programmes, health services and community events. A similar project is planned for Haiti.

Earlier this month, the IOC launched a new Youth Sport Centre in Gatumba, Burundi, which is jointly funded by the IOC, UNDP (the United Nations Development Programme) and the government of Burundi. The centre will organise sporting and educational activities for more than 7,000 young people.

We work closely with several UN agencies, programmes and NGOs to bring the benefits of physical activity to people around the world, especially in middle and low income countries. The UN's belief in the power of sport to contribute to social development was confirmed by the decision of this body in

2009 to grant the IOC UN Observer status. The relationship between our organisations continues to expand and deepen.

Last year, the IOC and the World Health Organisation signed a new memorandum of understanding agreeing to work together, both internationally and at the country level, to promote activities and policy choices that will reduce the risk of non-communicable diseases. We welcome the WHO Global Recommendations on Physical Activity for Health as another important development in our collaboration. The WHO recommendations place sport and physical activity at the core of NCD prevention.

The need to take more assertive action against NCDs is obvious. The problem is acute. The solution is at hand. The IOC is committed to the cause of combating NCDs through the promotion of physical activity and healthy lifestyles. We cannot do it alone. None of us can. But by working together, and by enlisting the support of governments, educational institutions, businesses, nongovernmental organisations and other elements of civil society, we can reverse the current trend.

I urge your support for several important steps that could make a significant difference in the lives of people around the world. Together, we could:

- Advocate for more safe and accessible public spaces for physical activity and sport. Children should not be forced to play in vacant lots littered with broken glass, alleys choked with trash or fields contaminated by chemical waste.
- Build new partnerships with sectors beyond sport — transportation, finance, urban planning, industry and others — to expand the impact of sport in urban areas.
- Work with government authorities and educators to increase the amount of time that students devote to physical education. A healthy child is a child ready to learn.
- Encourage the development of sport infrastructures and sport organisations. Sport is the primary gateway to physical activity and healthy lifestyles.

Perhaps most importantly, I call upon you to help the IOC and other sport organisations continue to forge new and stronger partnerships with the UN, governments and civil society at large.

Many Member States and United Nations agencies or programmes understand the value of sport in promoting development, sustainability, health and the objectives of the Millennium Development Goals. Encouraging others to integrate sport into those efforts will bring us closer to making our goals a reality.

In that spirit, it is the fervent hope of the International Olympic Committee that the critical role of the sports movement for the prevention of NCDs will be enshrined in the outcome document from this high-level meeting.

As a new Permanent Observer of the United Nations, and an active and responsible member of civil society, the IOC looks forward to continuing to play a role in the prevention and control of NCDs. We are committed to working on this issue in fruitful partnership with all involved parties.

The IOC and the Olympic Movement exist to place at the service of humanity. Working with and inspiring young people to be their best is central to our mission. We will continue to strive in this direction.

Together, we can turn back the rising tide of NCDs and create a global society that is healthier, more prosperous and more peaceful.

Thank you.