



**MESSAGE OF THE EXECUTIVE SECRETARY  
OF THE CONVENTION ON BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY  
BRAULIO FERREIRA DE SOUZA DIAS**

**on the occasion of  
WORLD HEALTH DAY  
7 APRIL 2016**

*“Step Up: Beat Diabetes”*

The World Health Organization’s objective of scaling up the prevention, care, and surveillance of diabetes on World Health Day 2016 provides a timely opportunity to reflect upon the profound impacts of biodiversity loss and its consequences for human and planetary health. The conservation, sustainable use of biodiversity in agricultural landscapes, forests and other terrestrial ecosystems, seascapes and freshwater systems can contribute to dietary diversity and to reducing the rising global health threat posed by diabetes and diet-related diseases through its potential contributions to healthier diets and food choices.

In 2012, diabetes claimed over 1.5 million lives, 80 per cent of them in low and middle-income countries. The first Global Report on Diabetes released by the World Health Organization to mark World Health Day indicates that diabetes has increased fourfold since 1980, with the greatest rise in low and middle-income countries. At the same time, one in every four people are overweight and one in every ten are obese. Urbanization, globalization, monoculture and agricultural intensification are increasingly eroding biodiversity and traditional food systems worldwide while also contributing to profound dietary changes. Many low and middle-income countries are also experiencing the double burden of malnutrition alongside a rise in overweight, obesity and diet-related chronic diseases, particularly among children and other vulnerable populations.

As the prevalence of diabetes continues to increase worldwide - with an expected doubling over the next 10 years alone – we need to ensure that the production systems that influence our food choices, practices and behaviours are in line with our global commitments to biodiversity conservation and sustainable development.

Supporting the healthy lifestyle choices endorsed by the World Health Organization to address the growing public health burden of diabetes and other non-communicable diseases can have parallel benefits for biodiversity. To get there, we can promote dietary diversification as an alternative to simplified diets



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that are calorie-rich but nutrient-poor. We can encourage people to moderate consumption of meat and processed foods and to increase consumption of fruits and vegetables. We can also support the sustainable management and ecological intensification of agro-ecosystems through more integrated policies and incentives, and we can increase opportunities for people to engage in regular physical exercise in parks and other settings.

A recent and compelling body of scientific evidence also suggests that increasing our exposure to microbial diversity in the natural environment can be beneficial to the microbiota present in humans and strengthen our immune functions and responses that modulate our risks of autoimmune diseases such as type I diabetes, and other non-communicable diseases including Type II diabetes and obesity. Yet, microbial diversity in our diets and the broader environment is increasingly compromised as we transition to increasingly urban settings.

Preventing diet-related epidemics such as diabetes is about much more than individual behaviour change and ensuring access to nutritious foods. It is also about promoting the maintenance and expansion of crop and livestock genetic diversity, and policy choices that diversify the sources of calories and quality of nutrients that end up on our plates, including the prevention of excessive use of sugar, fat and preservatives in processed food. As we support these goals, the related changes to our agriculture and food systems can have the added benefits of reducing greenhouse gas emissions, contributing to the regulation of water, air and nutrient cycles, restoring soil fertility, increasing ecosystem and human resilience, decreasing crop pests and pathogens, abating pressures on aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems, sustaining the genetic and species diversity central to food security and nutrition, while also spreading awareness of the mental, physiological and emotional health benefits biodiversity provides.

There will be critical opportunities to respond to these challenges at the thirteenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties in December, as decision-makers consider the implications of the findings of the State of Knowledge Review, *Connecting Global Priorities: Biodiversity and Human Health*<sup>1</sup>, jointly developed by the WHO and the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity. The complex but numerous vital linkages the report describes are a sobering reminder that we are all stakeholders in this undertaking. I urge all individuals, sectors and governments to consider these findings in this light.

By committing to the conservation and sustainable use of our precious natural heritage, we can achieve the transformational change necessary to maximize the human and ecosystem health benefits biodiversity can deliver to present and future generations.

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<sup>1</sup> Available at: [www.cbd.int/health/SOK-biodiversity-en.pdf](http://www.cbd.int/health/SOK-biodiversity-en.pdf)