Within a few decades, chronic noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) will dominate health care needs in most low- and middle-income countries as a result of the epidemiological transition and aging. Increasingly, policy makers and program managers are being challenged to formulate effective strategies for preventing NCDs, to address cost pressures arising from new technologies, and to mitigate the effects of disabilities on those affected by NCDs.

But how can policy makers control health costs even as new technologies become available? How might program managers deliver services as efficiently and equitably as possible? What are some broad guidelines for determining the roles of public policy in relation to preventing and controlling NCDs? What are the implications of the NCD burden for public policy? This report addresses these questions with the aim of equipping policy makers with a framework to address these issues in their own countries. The report examines trends in NCDs and prospects for improving NCD control and outcomes through the lens of public policy. Finally, it presents an agenda for action by the World Bank.

Projections are not predictions, but the report suggests a plausible scenario that could arise from the doubling of historical rates of NCD mortality reduction worldwide during 2005–15. Because of the difficulty
of offsetting aging trends, the total number of NCD deaths would still increase, but by about 3 million instead of about 6 million. This would be important progress, but also shows that even extraordinary success with NCD interventions would slow down, but not reverse, the overall upward trend in NCD morbidity and mortality because of population aging.

Thus the report presents two key messages. One is the need for public policies to prevent NCDs to the greatest extent possible, and in doing so to promote healthy aging and avoid premature deaths. The other is a concurrent need to recognize that the burden of NCDs will increase because of population aging, and therefore public policy has a role to play in dealing with the pressures that this will impose on health services. These messages are complementary and present both a challenge to action and a look at reality in terms of expectations under plausible scenarios.

The report is a call to action by countries and partner institutions. For the World Bank, it charts a course to help countries improve their health systems and outcomes, with an emphasis on those aspects that fit the Bank’s comparative advantage in health financing, development economics, and multisectoral actions. This report will serve as a useful addition to the knowledge base to guide the Bank’s work at the country, regional, and global levels.

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Acknowledgments

This report was prepared with overall guidance from Jean-Louis Sarbib, former senior vice president, Human Development Network; Jacques Baudouy, former director, Health, Nutrition, and Population; and Kei Kawabata, sector manager, Health, Nutrition, and Population.

Olusoji Adeyi, coordinator, Public Health Programs, managed the work program and prepared the report together with Owen Smith, economist, Young Professionals Program; and Sylvia Robles, senior health specialist on secondment to the World Bank from the Pan American Health Organization and the World Health Organization.

In the appendixes, the case study on Georgia was commissioned by the World Bank and prepared by Martin McKee, professor of European public health, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine; Dina Balabanova, lecturer, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine; and Natalia Koroleva, research fellow, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. The case study on India was prepared by Jishnu Das, economist, Development Research Group. The case study on Indonesia was prepared by Jed Friedman, economist, Development Research Group.

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the World Bank; Jumana Qamruddin, consultant to the World Bank; and Marc Suhrcke, economist, European Office for Investment for Health and Development, World Health Organization. The report also contains contributions from Eleonore Bachinger, consultant to the World Bank; Melinda Elias, junior professional associate, the World Bank; Sue Gao, summer intern, 2005, University of Washington; and Davidson Gwatkin, consultant to the World Bank. Yvette Atkins, senior program assistant, provided administrative support.

The internal peer reviewers were Logan Brenzel, Joy de Beyer, and George Schieber. The external peer reviewers were Robert Beaglehole, World Health Organization, Geneva; Dean Jamison, Institute of Medicine, Board on Global Health of the Institute of Medicine and University of California, San Francisco (concept note review only); Carlos Augusto Monteiro, School of Public Health, São Paulo, Brazil (concept note review only); Philip Musgrove, *Health Affairs Journal*, United States; Thomas Novotny, University of California, San Francisco; Pekka Puska, National Public Health Institute, Finland; Adedoyin Soyibo, Department of Economics, University of Ibadan, Nigeria; and Derek Yach, the Rockefeller Foundation, United States.

The team acknowledges observations, criticisms, assistance with data searches, work on regional reports, comments, and suggestions from the following individuals: Anabela Abreu, Florence Baingana, Enis Baris, Peter Berman, Anthony Bliss, Eduard Bos, Mariam Claeson, Laura Coronel, Isabella Ana Danel, David Evans, Armin Fidler, Jean-Jacques Frere, Paul Gertler, Jeffrey Gilbert, Joana Godinho, Pablo Gottret, Keith Hansen, Eva Jarawan, Anne Johansen, Lucia Kossarova, Kees Kostermans, Preeti Kudesia, Rama Lakshminarayanan, Elizabeth Lule, Akiko Maeda, Patricio Marquez, Daniel Miller, Ok Pannenborg, Anne-Maryse Pierre-Louis, Tawhid Nawaz, David Peters, G. N. V. Ramana, Fadia Saadah, Andreas Seiter, Meera Shekar, Nicole Tapay, Cara Vileno, Erika Yanick, and Adam Wagstaff. They contributed during one or more of the following: prior work on noncommunicable diseases, an internal consultation (June 13, 2005), a concept note review meeting (September 19, 2005), a decision meeting (May 30, 2006), and subsequent stages of work. The authors alone are responsible for the content of this report.

The authors thank Mary Fisk, Paola Scalabrin, Alice Faintich, and their team for work that improved the quality of the manuscript.
Abbreviations

CEA  cost-effectiveness analysis
CVD  cardiovascular disease
DALY disability-adjusted life year
g/dl grams per deciliter
GDP  gross domestic product
HNP health, nutrition, and population
HPV  human papillomavirus
NCD  noncommunicable disease
WHO World Health Organization