

Summary report on the

Annual intercountry meeting on the implementation of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control

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Cairo, Egypt
26–28 October 2015



**World Health
Organization**

Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean

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1. Introduction

The WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean organized the annual intercountry meeting on the implementation of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC) on 26–28 October 2015 in Cairo, Egypt. This year's meeting focused on two core areas: 1) the general implementation of the WHO FCTC with its demand and supply side measures; and 2) the implementation of Article 6 of the WHO FCTC with its taxation increase and price measures.

The meeting was attended by representatives of 14 Parties to the Convention, one country observer (Morocco) and several international experts. The participants included representatives from ministries of health, ministries of finance and tax departments, university economists, various specialists, tobacco control programme officers, WHO temporary advisers, representatives of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and several nongovernmental organizations, staff from WHO and members of the Convention Secretariat (CSF). The meeting was chaired by Dr Danesh Jafari, (Islamic Republic of Iran), Dr Jawad Al-Lawati (Oman) and Dr Sahar Latif Labib (Egypt) on a rotating basis.

The specific objectives of the meeting were to: review the implementation status of the WHO FCTC at country level including the proven successful measures and ways to scale up; identify priorities for future work; promote implementation of the Guidelines for implementation of Article 6 of the WHO FCTC, adopted by the COP in October 2014; strengthen Parties' implementation of the WHO FCTC and policies related water pipe tobacco and tobacco industry interference; endorse impact assessments and reporting under the

WHO FCTC; and promote ratification/accession to the Protocol to Eliminate Illicit Trade in Tobacco Products by the Parties.

In relation to taxation of tobacco products, the objectives of the meeting were to: review the commitments under the WHO FCTC for taxation increase; analyse the regional status for taxes on tobacco products; review international and regional best practices; look into dedication/earmarking possibilities; address challenges and barriers; and identify the way forward for improving implementation of the WHO FCTC, including the adoption of new taxation policies in Member States.

In his opening remarks, Dr Ala Alwan, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, noted that the July release of WHO's Report on the Global Tobacco Epidemic presented an alarming picture for the Eastern Mediterranean Region. The Region had the second highest average smoking prevalence among men and was among one of only two WHO regions that did not see a decline in smoking prevalence between 2000 and 2012. In fact, according to current projections, smoking prevalence in the Region would increase between 2010 and 2025. These figures indicated that the Region would not meet the noncommunicable disease target of a 30% relative reduction in the prevalence of current tobacco use in persons aged 15 and over.

In light of this situation, Dr Alwan emphasized the need for scaling up tobacco control and for sustainability in implementing its policies. He also noted with concern that not a single country of the Region had ratified/acceded to the WHO FCTC's Protocol to Eliminate Illicit Trade in Tobacco Products. Compared to other WHO regions, the Eastern Mediterranean Region had the lowest average tobacco prices and the second lowest average excise tax per pack. Given that tobacco

consumption was expected to rise in the Region, it was imperative that countries move forward in this area in order to control consumption. For this reason WHO had invited participants from both the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Finance in order to discuss the issue. Dr Alwan concluded by expressing the hope for fruitful discussions between the ministries and assured the meeting of WHO's continued commitment to support countries in tobacco control.

Dr Tibor Szilagyi from the Convention Secretariat highlighted that 2015 marked the tenth anniversary of the Convention's implementation and commended participants on their dedication to tobacco control, but noted that there was still much to be done. International experience showed that a significant number of deaths could be averted by implementing strong FCTC policies. Further, it was imperative to ensure that data were available to all regions so that regions could share effective strategies.

2. Summary of discussions

With regard to discussions on taxation and on the outcomes of the WHO Report on the Global Tobacco Epidemic, it was clearly recognized that there are major gaps in the countries of the Region. Many countries implement customs fees rather than excise taxes. Many countries have a very low rate of taxes. Even in some countries where the taxation levels are high and up to the maximum recommended levels, the prices are still low and products are still very affordable.

It was also emphasized in the presentations and discussions that the main factor in illicit trade is governance, not pricing. Evidence shows that smuggling is linked not to taxation levels but rather to poor

governance and weak enforcement in areas such as customs. Contrary to tobacco industry claims, increased smuggling does not automatically follow tax increases and the experts presented evidence in this regard. The tobacco industry is making concerted efforts to stop the increase in tobacco prices and taxes, and to make it difficult for countries to revisit their taxation systems and policies.

A special session was held to discuss the status of tobacco taxes in countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) especially in light of the free trade agreements, which are entering into force in two GCC countries very soon. It was agreed that WHO and the WHO FCTC secretariat will support the process of introducing excise taxes into the GCC; one identified tool was through writing officially to leaders in GCC on the topic to address this issue and take steps forward in introducing an excise tax system.

On other WHO FCTC aspects, it was jointly agreed with all Parties that there is a need for a balanced approach in implementing the demand and supply side measures. It was also agreed that countries should aim at implementing the highest level measures of all policies rather than introducing softer measures in different policies.

The status of the Protocol's implementation, ratification and entry into force was identified as a priority for the Region. Two countries have completed the process of becoming a Party at the national level but the depositing of ratification instruments is delayed at international level. Countries were requested to expedite the process at national level with the support of the WHO FCTC Secretariat and the WHO Regional Office. Multisectorality was identified as a key element in speeding up the process at national level. Protecting the process from the vested

interests of the tobacco industry was another key element discussed by Parties; it was noted that in some countries where there are national monopolies the tobacco industry is involved in the decision-making process related to the protocol ratification/accession.

A preliminary meeting prior to the Seventh session of the Conference of the Parties (COP7) was requested by all Parties to discuss related and emerging issues related to COP documents. The Regional Office will coordinate this with WHO FCTC secretariat.

Egypt as a Party to the WHO FCTC will lead a process of proposing discussion of TAPS in COP7 as agreed by all. Parties are requesting COP guidance on how to control tobacco use in movies and television.

The annual meeting was identified as a useful tool to address WHO FCTC relevant issues and to bring the knowledge of parties up to date with regards to its different developments, it was agreed to continue following this practice for the coming years.

3. Next steps

WHO FCTC Article 6

Countries

1. Advance the issue of tobacco tax increases, in line with WHO FCTC Article 6. With the Regional Director's letter, forward the proposals on tobacco taxation developed during the meeting to Ministers of Health as well as Ministers of Finance.

2. Brief high-level national finance authorities on the meeting and its outcomes, and attach to such communications a copy of WHO FCTC Article 6 and its implementation guidelines.
3. When needed, initiate requests for technical support from WHO and CSF.
4. Start national analyses related to taxation status in order to identify gaps, priorities and way forward.

WHO and CSF

5. Raise taxation issues with regional bodies such as the League of Arab States, the Organization of Islamic Conference and the Gulf Cooperation Council through direct communications and letters from the Regional Director and head of the CSF, in addition to suggesting the integrating of the topic into their annual meetings.
6. Provide tailored technical support to Parties based on parties' official requests to both WHO and CSF.

GCC special session related to taxation

Countries

7. Send a written briefing to all concerned national authorities on the outcome of the meeting.
8. Include in the excise tax proposal, before endorsing it, the possibility of biannual reviews to monitor implementation and consider the possibility of changing its details, such as the base of the tax, the percentage of the tax, etc., in line with inflation and rising income levels.

WHO

9. Send a letter from the Regional Director to the GCC on the importance of the tobacco tax, particularly regarding the introduction of an excise tax on tobacco products.
10. Coordinate with the World Bank on this issue and advocate for the possibility of the World Bank sending a letter to the GCC on the importance of adoption of new tax system, particularly on the introduction of excise tax on tobacco products.

CSF

11. Send a letter to the GCC endorsing the introduction of an excise tax.
12. Coordinate with the International Monetary Fund on supporting the introduction of excise taxes.

WHO FCTC general implementation

Countries

13. Scale up political commitments by requesting participants that attended the meeting to continue engaging their political decision makers at all levels through regular updates and technical briefings.
14. Encourage regulation of all tobacco products, including emerging ones such as water pipe and e-cigarettes in line with all supply and demand measures of the WHO FCTC, including all recommendations related to such products.
15. Strengthen implementation of smoke-free policies and implement appropriate awareness raising programmes to promote such measures. Strong implementation and enforcement is needed through designation and involvement of relevant authorities. It is

important to apply this policy to all tobacco products, including water pipe and e-cigarettes.

16. Address tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship (TAPS), including point-of-sale advertising, comprehensively so that it is protected from the vested interests of the tobacco industry. In this regard, it was suggested to send a letter from the Regional Director to Parties on TAPS in drama early before Ramadan. Parties are requested to send the details of their ministers of information/media to WHO to start this process early
17. Finalize a proposal for COP discussion on TAPS in drama as it is an area of major concern to this Region. TAPS presence in drama is undermining other tobacco control activities in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, which calls for greater action in this area including bringing it to the attention of the Conference of Parties COP for further guidance to Member States. Egypt is leading the efforts in this regard and will be working with other parties on finalizing a proposal on this issue.
18. Re-examine the status of Article 11 implementation and guard the process of pictorial health warnings from the interests of the tobacco industry, keeping in mind best practices and evidence-based strategies at the country level.
19. Take all necessary steps to ratify/accede to the Protocol to Eliminate Illicit Trade in Tobacco Products as soon as possible to accelerate its entry into force. The Protocol is a key tool to combat illicit trade in the Region. Noting that illicit trade is an area of concern, Parties are encouraged to continue monitoring and evaluation of this issue.

WHO and CSF

20. Appoint an informal volunteer focal point from countries of the Region for each annual WHO FCTC meeting to follow up with

countries as well as both WHO and CSF on the status of the recommendations. In the meeting that follows, a presentation will be given on the implementation of the previous years' recommendations.

21. Develop copyright-free warnings for Parties to avoid the long process of acquiring warnings from the global database.
22. Consider conducting regional research on illicit trade in the Region. There is a gap in evaluating the size of illicit trade.
23. Provide any technical support needed to support the process of ratification/accession to the Protocol.



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