



Address by
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to the
ANNUAL INTERCOUNTRY MEETING ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE WHO
FRAMEWORK CONVENTION ON TOBACCO CONTROL (WHO FCTC)
Cairo, Egypt, 26–28 October 2015

Distinguished Guests, Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my pleasure to welcome you to this meeting, held jointly with the WHO FCTC Secretariat, to discuss the implementation of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC). This year the meeting will focus on two important areas. The first is the general implementation of the WHO FCTC and the second is the implementation of Article 6 of the WHO FCTC on taxation increase and price measures. We chose to focus on taxation in this meeting as it is one of the main challenges facing this region.

Among the key aims of this meeting is to identify the gaps in implementation and to agree on ways to scale up. This especially applies to the policies of the WHO FCTC that have been proven to be effective and to have impact. These are the so-called MPOWER tobacco control measures and the proven cost-effective interventions in prevention and control of noncommunicable diseases, also called “best buys”. In addition we will agree ways forward to improve the status of the WHO FCTC protocol on illicit trade in tobacco in the Region. As of today we do not have a single ratification or accession to the Protocol. Illicit tobacco trade is increasing in the Region and this is a challenge that we need to face together.

In July of this year, WHO released its report on the global tobacco epidemic 2015, which presented an alarming picture for our region. Compared with other regions, the Eastern Mediterranean Region has the second highest average smoking prevalence among men, and is among one of only two regions that did not see a decline in smoking prevalence between 2000 and 2012. According to current projections, smoking prevalence in the Eastern Mediterranean Region will increase between 2010 and 2025 unless something drastic is done. I cannot

emphasize enough the need for both scaling up tobacco control and for sustainability in policy implementation, particularly given the current trends in tobacco use regionally. The 2015 report also indicated that countries continue to slide up and down in their implementation of different tobacco control measures, which stifles progress.

It is not all bad news, there is hope and we are seeing increasing commitment. Sixteen countries in the Region have adopted the tobacco reduction target of 30%, while Pakistan aims for a commendable 50% reduction. These are positive developments, but in order to achieve the target set for noncommunicable diseases, the tobacco control situation of needs to improve, drastically. The SIMSMOKE results in the Region indicate that if countries fully implement the six recommended simple tobacco control policies, they will be able, not only to save lives, but also to decrease prevalence of tobacco use throughout the Region.

While working together to achieve the maximum level of implementation in tobacco control policies, we must not forget that interference of the tobacco industry and its manipulative role in preventing regulation in the Region poses a real threat to progress. Among the industry's latest tactics is the heavy marketing of other tobacco products that are not as strongly regulated or taxed as cigarettes. Many non-cigarette forms of tobacco are not regulated at all in the Region, leaving large room for tobacco industry manipulation. In the WHO FCTC, we find the solution in the implementation guidelines adopted in relation to article 5.3 and which provide Parties with guidance on how to protect their tobacco control policies from the tobacco industry.

Increasing taxes on tobacco products is one the most effective tobacco control measures. However global developments in the area of taxation are weak and I am calling for further attention

to this area. Despite the fact that raising tobacco taxes to more than 75% of the retail price is cost-effective and has high impact on consumption, very few countries have increased taxes to this best practice level. In fact, the raising of taxes is the least implemented demand side measure of the WHO FCTC. Only 10% of the world's population live in countries with sufficiently high taxes on tobacco products. Furthermore, this measure has seen the least improvement since 2008.

In the Eastern Mediterranean Region, only two countries are among the 33 identified highest achieving countries in this policy area, Jordan and Palestine. While some other countries are implementing high taxation levels, including Egypt, Pakistan and Tunisia, they are not up to best practice level. Compared to other WHO regions, this region has the second lowest average tobacco prices and the second lowest average excise tax per pack. Given that tobacco

consumption is expected to rise in the Region, it is imperative that countries move forward in this area in order to control consumption.

Considering the status of taxes in the Region, we decided to take a different approach to this meeting in order to give this issue its due attention and provide the multisectoral perspective needed to achieve the tobacco target. We have therefore invited, and welcome, participants from both ministries of health and ministries of finance to this meeting with the aim of thoroughly discussing the taxation issue. With both of these parties at the table, we hope to agree on a way forward that scales up implementation, both in WHO FCTC generally and in tobacco control policies in particular.

I look forward to the outcomes of your deliberations. I am confident that the bringing together of ministries of finance and ministries of health will infuse a collaborative spirit into this meeting and strengthen Parties' commitments to implement the WHO FCTC at national level.

Finally I would like to take this opportunity to thank our WHO FCTC Secretariat colleagues as well as all participating regional and international experts for joining us and providing their enriching perspectives to this meeting.

I wish you all a successful meeting and fruitful outcomes.