

Summary report on the
**Intercountry meeting on
strengthening Parties'
capacity for implementing
Article 5.3 of the WHO
Framework Convention on
Tobacco Control**

Virtual meeting
26–28 February 2024



**World Health
Organization**

Eastern Mediterranean Region

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1. Introduction

WHO's Eastern Mediterranean Region is facing tough challenges in controlling tobacco use. These include a strong tobacco industry, high prevalence of tobacco use and less focus on tobacco control due to other competing priorities. To overcome these challenges, there is an urgent need to amplify tobacco control measures, which necessitates continuous monitoring of the tobacco industry and exposing its tactics and activities to decision-makers, the public and the media. Collaboration with nongovernmental organizations and other stakeholders to observe the industry's actions is key.

Article 5.3 of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC) aims to protect strong tobacco control policies from the harmful influence of the tobacco industry. Specifically, Article 5.3 legally requires countries to protect their health policies from tobacco industry influence. In the Eastern Mediterranean Region, the tobacco industry has a long history of using various methods to weaken tobacco control. These include questioning scientific facts, trying to influence government decisions, overstating the industry's contribution to the economy and shaping public opinion.

Recent data from the 2023 Global Tobacco Industry Interference Index reveals alarming levels of tobacco industry interference in the Region, including the industry's success in revoking bans on electronic tobacco and nicotine devices in Egypt, interfering with taxation policies in Kuwait, influencing national standards boards in Iraq, Jordan and Sudan, and garnering support from top officials in the Islamic Republic of Iran. A concerning observation from the Index is that in five of the eight participating countries from the Region – the Islamic Republic of Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Pakistan and Sudan – the scores have deteriorated compared to 2021, indicating increasing tobacco industry interference.

In response to these challenges, the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, in collaboration with WHO headquarters and with technical support from the WHO FCTC Secretariat, convened an intercountry meeting to bring together regional and international experts, country representatives, nongovernmental organizations and journalists, as well as country regulatory authorities, to discuss the latest evidence, share experiences and learn from successes and challenges in implementation of Article 5.3. The meeting was intended as a crucial step in strengthening the Region's resolve and capacity to counter tobacco industry interference and advance tobacco control efforts.

The specific objectives of the meeting were to:

- improve the understanding of the various tactics employed by the tobacco industry to influence government decisions, and examine and analyse the false information they share;
- identify and address challenges in implementation of Article 5.3;
- identify the role of nongovernmental organizations and the media in monitoring tobacco industry activities and supporting governments efforts in tobacco control; and
- agree on the next steps in implementing Article 5.3 and identify key topics for follow-up.

Dr Fatimah El-Awa, Regional Adviser, Tobacco Free Initiative, WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, commenced the session, noting the critical importance of addressing tobacco industry activities and implementing tobacco control measures in the Region, in alignment with global agendas such as the voluntary targets for noncommunicable diseases reduction and the Sustainable Development Goals. She highlighted concerning trends in tobacco use, especially among youth, and called for urgency in curbing this epidemic to safeguard future generations. Dr El-Awa underscored the pervasive influence of the tobacco industry, which spread false

information and actively opposed tobacco control policies, even forming alliances to resist regulation. She stressed the legal and health obligations to combat the tobacco industry's tactics and called for continued vigilance and action at both national and regional levels to tackle this persistent health challenge effectively.

2. Summary of discussions

The 2023 Global Tobacco Industry Interference Index

Dr Mary Assunta, Head of Global Research and Advocacy, and Mr Yodhim Dela Rosa, Global Research Coordinator, from the Global Center for Good Governance in Tobacco Control (GGTC), presented the findings of the Global Tobacco Industry Interference Index, released in late 2023, which reviews how countries implement Article 5.3 of the WHO FCTC. The Index assesses seven categories based on Article 5.3 guidelines, including industry participation in policy development, corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities, benefits given to the tobacco industry, unnecessary interactions, conflicts of interest, transparency, and protective measures. The 2023 Index revealed increased industry interference in tobacco control policy across many countries, undermining government efforts. While some countries performed well, others faced high levels of industry interference. Dr Assunta highlighted the various tactics used by the industry, including CSR activities to improve their image, and called for cohesive government action to combat interference, de-normalize tobacco-related CSR, increase transparency and implement protective measures.

The importance of Article 5.3 in tobacco control

Ms Kate Lannan, Senior Legal Officer, and Ms Evita Ricafort, Technical Officer (Legal), from the Secretariat of the WHO FCTC noted the unique conflict between the tobacco industry and public

health policies, highlighting the deadly nature of tobacco products and the industry's financial resources. They discussed guidelines for implementing Article 5.3, focusing on transparency, limiting interaction with the industry and rejecting partnerships. They stressed that Article 5.3 obligations extend to all government sectors, not just health ministries, and emphasized the role of civil society in monitoring and enforcing tobacco control measures. Additionally, they highlighted resources such as the WHO FCTC Knowledge Hub and other nongovernmental organizations working on Article 5 implementation.

Challenges in implementing Article 5.3 in the Eastern Mediterranean Region

Ms Amina Khairy, writer and journalist, Independent Arabia, outlined the challenges faced in implementing Article 5.3 of the WHO FCTC in the Region, including the tumultuous political and economic landscape. Ms Khairy highlighted the limited efforts of the media in addressing tobacco-related issues amidst conflicts, economic crises and declining revenues. She pointed to the paradox of state-owned tobacco companies influencing policies aimed at tobacco control. Moreover, she discussed the role of social media influencers in promoting tobacco use and suggested strategies to raise awareness through both traditional and digital media channels, emphasizing the need for sustained efforts to combat tobacco consumption.

Working groups

Participants were assigned to three working groups according to their area of work: nongovernmental organizations; government; and the media. They were asked to identify key elements and challenges in addressing the efforts of the tobacco industry to undermine tobacco control.

The nongovernmental organizations group discussion focused on their experiences of tobacco industry interference and the industry's

collaboration with governments. The lack of knowledge among governments on Article 5.3 was highlighted, concerns were raised about former government employees being appointed by the tobacco industry after leaving their positions, leading to conflicts of interest, and instances of indirect interference were discussed. Recommendations included holding government employees accountable and prohibiting them from working for the tobacco industry after leaving their positions.

The government group discussion noted that governments were working with nongovernmental organizations, health organizations, tax authorities and journalists to raise awareness about tobacco industry interference. Challenges were identified, including a lack of awareness within health ministries and among researchers about tobacco industry tactics. Examples were shared of efforts to regulate new tobacco products, such as heated tobacco and nicotine pouches, and concerns were raised about industry interference in taxation policy and implementation of tobacco control laws. Some good practices were identified, including requirements for tobacco control officials to sign disclosure forms declaring no links to the tobacco industry.

The media group discussed the importance of selecting journalists with personal experiences relating to smoking to cover tobacco-related issues. They also highlighted the aggressive marketing tactics used by tobacco companies, especially through social media, to promote smoking. Concerns were raised about conflicts of interest when tobacco companies fund research or influence media coverage. Collaboration between nongovernmental organizations, health workers and the media was emphasized as essential for effective tobacco control. Topics identified for media coverage included smoking among school children, the impact of smoking in war zones and creative investigative reporting on tobacco industry practices.

Overall, the group discussions emphasized the need for collaboration between nongovernmental organizations, governments and the media to combat tobacco industry interference and raise awareness about the harmful effects of smoking. Examples of successful strategies and ongoing challenges were shared, providing valuable insights for tobacco control efforts in the Region.

Tobacco litigation

Ms Deborah Sy, Head of Global Public Policy and Strategy of the GGTC, delved into the technical aspects of tobacco litigation and liability, focusing on the Conference of Parties (COP) decision on this topic. She discussed the evolution of tobacco litigation, including landmark cases and the various legal actions involved, such as civil suits and administrative proceedings. Ms Sy highlighted the challenges of tobacco litigation, including the need for extensive legal expertise and the tactics used by the tobacco industry to prolong legal battles. She also emphasized the importance of exploring alternative mechanisms, such as compensation funds, to enhance access to justice. Overall, Ms Sy provided valuable insights and recommendations for strengthening tobacco control efforts through effective legal strategies.

Plain packaging

Ms Hayley Jones, Director, McCabe Centre for Law and Cancer, presented on Australia's successful implementation of tobacco plain packaging as a crucial win for public health, despite facing formidable opposition from the tobacco industry. She discussed the legal battles and strategies employed to defend these measures, emphasizing evidence-based approaches, bipartisan support and transparent communication. Ms Jones highlighted Australia's victories in domestic and international courts, underscoring the importance of proactive measures and solidarity against tobacco industry interference. She

concluded by advocating for continued global efforts to advance tobacco control, emphasizing the broader implications for public health.

Mr Mishaal Al Tamimi, Director of the WHO Collaborating Center for Tobacco Plain Packaging at the Saudi Food and Drug Authority, presented on the technical aspects of implementing plain packaging for tobacco products in Saudi Arabia. He highlighted the country's successful implementation over the past four to five years and emphasized the importance of sharing experiences with other nations. Mr Al Tamimi discussed the steps taken, including reviewing experiences from countries such as Australia, France and the United Kingdom, legal preparations and notification to the World Trade Organization, and provided evidence supporting the effectiveness of plain packaging in reducing smoking rates, citing studies from various countries. He also addressed challenges faced during implementation, such as campaigns against plain packaging, and highlighted the government's commitment to enforcing the regulations, ultimately leading to the successful adoption and compliance with plain packaging requirements in Saudi Arabia.

World No Tobacco Day 2024: Protecting children from tobacco industry interference

Ms Jaimie Guerra, Communications Officer, WHO headquarters, presented the new approach to addressing tobacco industry interference and protecting youth from its impacts taken this year for World No Tobacco Day, through a campaign driven by youth themselves rather than traditional messaging from authorities. The focus is on engaging young people in creating content and initiatives that resonate with their concerns, such as highlighting how the tobacco industry affects issues such as child labour and the environment. The campaign aims to leverage social media platforms popular among youth, utilize influencers and organize events such as "colour runs" to spread awareness. Collaboration

between nongovernmental organizations and governments is encouraged to facilitate youth involvement through activities such as press conferences, media contests and school projects, ultimately aiming to empower young people to lead the charge against tobacco industry influence.

Key elements required by the WHO FCTC to counter the tobacco industry

Ms Kate Lannan and Ms Evita Ricafort discussed the recent decisions made at COP10, including those related to Article 5.3 and holding the tobacco industry accountable and liable. They highlighted the Article 19 civil liability toolkit and decisions on environmental regulation, human rights and forward-looking tobacco control measures. The speakers discussed practical measures under Article 5.3 guidelines, such as raising awareness, rejecting partnerships with the tobacco industry and managing conflicts of interest. Additionally, they outlined measures to de-normalize tobacco industry activities, avoid preferential treatment and enforce monitoring. The importance of civil society and the media in implementing and enforcing these measures was emphasized, especially for digital media.

Working group discussions

Participants were again assigned to working groups according to their area of work, although this time the government participants were distributed among the nongovernmental organization and media groups due to the small number of government participants on the day. The groups were asked to identify what is needed at country level to counter the tobacco industry.

The nongovernmental organizations group noted that many countries face significant challenges due to both direct and indirect interference

from the tobacco industry. Tobacco use has become ingrained in various aspects of society, including sports, tourism and cultural events. In many countries, tobacco industry interference is mainly indirect, often observed during significant events like the introduction of plain packaging and tax increases. Industry influence is evident on social media platforms, particularly during campaigns targeting public opinion. There is a lack of transparency regarding the extent of the tobacco industry's economic influence and its impact on the country. Concerns were raised about conflicts of interest, particularly regarding government officials or legislators with ties to the tobacco industry.

Some governments have responded with strong measures, such as implementing smoking regulations and enforcing fines for violations. Centralizing tobacco control efforts under one umbrella has facilitated coordination among government entities and nongovernmental organizations.

The group recommended comprehensive assessments to identify tobacco industry interference, both in legislative processes and implementation efforts, to understand the full extent of the issue and inform targeted interventions. Robust surveillance systems (observatories) need to be established to monitor and track instances of industry interference, enabling timely intervention and the implementation of effective countermeasures to safeguard public health policies.

The group called for advocacy for increased transparency surrounding the economic influence of the tobacco industry by pushing for the disclosure of financial data and lobbying activities, enabling informed decision-making and public scrutiny. Similarly, advocacy is needed for legislative measures to prohibit sponsored media activities by the tobacco industry and address conflicts of interest, ensuring that policy-making processes remain free from undue influence and manipulation. Public awareness campaigns are needed targeting various sectors,

including the medical community, to educate them about the tactics used by the tobacco industry and the importance of resisting their influence in promoting public health.

Strategic collaboration with media outlets should be undertaken to disseminate information about tobacco industry tactics and expose any violations, leveraging their reach and influence to raise awareness and advocate for policy change. Partnerships should also be formed between legal organizations and nongovernmental organizations to pursue legal avenues for holding the tobacco industry accountable for any violations of regulations or attempts to undermine public health initiatives, ensuring that legal recourse is available to address misconduct effectively.

The media working group emphasized the importance of setting specific targets, such as raising taxes and conducting media campaigns, to address tobacco control effectively. Using social media to target parents and children with anti-tobacco messaging, as well as incentivizing youth to become ambassadors for tobacco control, was also suggested. The use of youth focus groups was proposed, employing gaming techniques to gather insights and develop tailored messaging. Participants also emphasized the importance of directly engaging youth in tobacco control efforts, using data-driven approaches to inform strategies.

Overall, both groups recognized the need for collaboration with policy-makers and media outlets to amplify tobacco control efforts. Tailoring messaging to specific demographics, including youth and policy-makers, was considered essential for effective communication. Data-driven approaches, including the use of focus groups and analytics, were highlighted as critical for informing media strategies and messaging. They identified specific challenges and recommended strategies to address them, focusing on legislative action, public awareness campaigns and engagement with key stakeholders.

Collaboration for tobacco control

Ms Worrawan Jirathanapiwat, Manager, WHO FCTC Knowledge Hub for Article 5.3, School of Global Studies, Thammasat University, Thailand, focused on international best practices for multisectoral collaboration to strengthen Parties' capacity to implement Article 5.3 of the WHO FCTC. She highlighted reports indicating progress in implementing comprehensive multisectoral national tobacco control strategies and programmes, emphasizing the importance of collaboration in sustaining tobacco control efforts. Case studies from various countries illustrated successful strategies in countering tobacco industry interference through multi-stakeholder partnerships. She emphasized the need for transparency, openness and a unified approach across government, nongovernmental organizations and international organizations to protect public health initiatives from tobacco industry influence. Finally, Ms Jirathanapiwat encouraged advocacy for comprehensive strategies and actions within countries and organizations to safeguard public health against industry interference.

Dr Khurram Hashmi, Senior Technical Advisor on Tobacco Control at Vital Strategies, presented two case studies illustrating successful collaboration between government and civil society for tobacco control in Pakistan. The first case study showed how civil society's advocacy countered tobacco industry pressure, leading to the implementation of graphic health warnings on cigarette packs. The second case study highlighted proactive measures by the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government to ban e-cigarettes sales to minors, with civil society support. Dr Hashmi emphasized the crucial role of sustained partnerships in combating tobacco industry influence and promoting public health initiatives.

Dr Wael Safwat, Coordinator of the Egyptian Coalition for Tobacco Control and Egyptian NCD Alliance, discussed Egypt's efforts to combat tobacco use, particularly focusing on the challenges posed by

new tobacco products such as e-cigarettes and heated tobacco. He highlighted the need for comprehensive tobacco control measures and emphasized the importance of involving youth and leveraging media partnerships in anti-smoking initiatives. Looking forward, he outlined strategies such as regulating all tobacco products, enhancing quit smoking campaigns and advocating for smoke-free environments. Dr Safwat stressed the importance of collaboration and regional efforts in achieving a tobacco-free world.

Dr Mary Assunta highlighted successful tobacco control efforts in Cambodia, Indonesia and Philippines, emphasizing collaboration and coordination. In Cambodia, a ban on tobacco-related CSR activities in educational facilities was achieved through collaboration with the Ministry of Education. In Indonesia pictorial health warnings on tobacco packs were adopted through interdepartmental collaboration despite the challenges. In Philippines, the Department of Health worked with the Civil Service Commission to implement Article 5.3 of the WHO FCTC. Dr Assunta underscored the importance of clear policy objectives, collaboration with non-health sectors, timelines and strategic planning for effective tobacco control initiatives.

Participants were divided into groups according to country to discuss plans to continue collaborating in the future, while specifically outlining two to three activities to promote Article 5.3 in their country. The table in Annex 1 outlines the activities proposed by each country.

3. Recommendations and next steps

For Member States

1. Plan and implement the country level activities to promote Article 5.3 identified during the working group discussions on day three of the meeting (see Annex 1).
2. Leverage the theme of World No Tobacco Day 2024 for planning and conducting the country activities.
3. Develop a mechanism for follow-up, including meeting regularly as country groups to discuss planned activities.
4. Ensure collaboration between the media, ministries of health and nongovernmental organizations, including continued follow-up discussions between these entities.

For WHO

5. Continue providing the technical support needed by country groups to plan and implement their activities.
6. Provide countries with suggested World No Tobacco Day 2024 activities and campaign materials to support country activities.


4. Annex 1. Proposed country activities for 2024

Country	Planned 2024 activity	Short description of action plan
Egypt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a factsheet on key findings for Egypt from the 2024 Tobacco Industry Interference Index • Monitor TAPS violations during 2024 Ramadan series • Introduce an honorary prize for tobacco control in the name of Dr Essam ElMoghazy and Dr Hamdy ElSayed • Augment content of the Egyptian observatory website 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collect information • Develop factsheet • Develop a team and protocol of TAPS violation in drama • Work actively on monitoring • Develop a report • Develop a competition and call for ideas • Define criteria for evaluation • Select winners • Develop a new module in the observatory to collect success stories as well as violations
Iraq	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen the work of the tobacco free school project in primary and secondary schools by raising awareness among children, youth, teachers and school personnel on the dangers of tobacco use and tobacco industry interference 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase awareness among 400 school teachers in 36 selected schools (18 primary and 18 secondary) distributed in six educational directorates in Baghdad on the harmful effects of tobacco by the end of 2024 • Establish peer-to-peer education (knowledge and skills) in 36 primary and secondary schools on tobacco prevention by the end of 2024 • Enable an anti-tobacco school environment in 36 primary and secondary schools
Jordan	<p>Conduct an advocacy campaign to implement plain packaging on tobacco products and ENDS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage stakeholders • Identify a successful example, Saudi Arabia, to learn from their experience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • List all entities and representatives to be involved (or to anticipate resistance from) • Hold a webinar with colleagues from Saudi Arabia (and/or Oman) to showcase their success (and invite key stakeholders in Jordan)

Country	Planned 2024 activity	Short description of action plan
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generate data about the constituents of tobacco products and ENDS to highlight the need for packaging that is not misleading or youth-attracting • Generate brief advocacy tools to enable advocates to argue for the need for plain packaging and pre-empt the arguments of the tobacco industry • Enable youth advocates • Undertake social media engagement • Engage news media 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Produce a video informed by the Royal Scientific Society’s work to highlight the toxic constituents of tobacco products and ENDS • Engage youth to examine the impact of current packaging on Jordanian youth; could be part of the video or a separate one • Produce talking points in brief, evidence-based sheets that are accessible to youth, the media and other advocates • Integrate a call for plain packaging into the planned WHO capacity-building event for “Champions of Wellness”, which includes how to debate and advocate with many audiences, including parliamentarians • Create social media posts regarding plain-packaging as a means to protect youth • Explore the possibility of hosting a live television debate live on one of the main programmes with a high viewership • Produce a documentary about ENDS in the market and their contents and marketing
Kuwait	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use smoking cessation clinics to educate the public on the dangers of smoking and industry tactics • Advocate for media independence by raising awareness and implementing regulations to prohibit any support from the tobacco industry, including financing of the media • Establish a stringent policy to prohibit any affiliations or connections between members of higher parliamentary committees and tobacco industry companies • Prevent nongovernmental organizations from receiving any form of support from the tobacco industry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utilize diverse media channels to disseminate information about the dangers of smoking, ensuring no support is accepted from the tobacco industry • Engage with parliamentary committees to prevent conflicts of interest with the tobacco industry, upon the Parliament’s reconvening in April to ensure transparency and integrity in legislative affairs related to tobacco control • Educate and empower nongovernmental organizations to resist tobacco industry influence and collaborate on initiatives to reduce smoking-related diseases

Country	Planned 2024 activity	Short description of action plan
Lebanon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empower medical staff to communicate smoking risks to patients effectively • Hold a national cancer awareness campaign focused on tobacco • Form a nongovernmental organization subcommittee • Re-activate the National Steering Committee for Tobacco Control • Conduct awareness raising on tobacco harm among journalists/the media • Hold a roundtable awareness session with parliamentarians on tobacco taxation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct workshops to train medical staff on effectively communicating smoking risks, expanding to mosque imams delivering anti-smoking messages during Friday prayers • Develop a video to raise awareness on tobacco use to be broadcast on different media outlets • Target school children to prevent smoking initiation • Hold training of trainers for educators in schools to hold interactive sessions with students on the dangers of tobacco use • Launch a TikTok competition for school children • Seek support from WHO, nongovernmental organizations and the Ministry of Health • Play a lead role as a tobacco taxation lobbying group • To be launched shortly • Encourage participation from different stakeholders (other ministries, academia, nongovernmental organizations) • Raise awareness on harms of tobacco and tobacco industry interference among the media • Work with the media to disseminate this information
Morocco	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hold an awareness raising campaign for teachers and students on tobacco industry interference on the occasion of World No Tobacco Day (WNTD) 2024 	
Pakistan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Activate the recently-developed national strategy on tobacco control • Engage youth groups for WNTD 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Call for implementation of the strategy and acceleration of national legislation • Work with the Pakistan Girls Guides and Boy Scouts Associations for specific WNTD activities

Country	Planned 2024 activity	Short description of action plan
Saudi Arabia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a factsheet on a recently-published study on the illicit tobacco trade in Pakistan • Hold a virtual multisectoral national seminar on tobacco control • Organize a marathon/sports event in Riyadh • Conduct a school-based initiative to raise awareness on the dangers of smoking amongst students • Hold a tobacco control campaign in Mecca during Hajj 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop and disseminate the factsheet for policy-makers and parliamentarians • Organize the seminar jointly by WHO and the Ministry of Health • Invite parliamentarians, other ministries, youth groups, doctors' associations • Collaborate with charities, the sports ministry and the media to coordinate event • A training for teachers has already been completed • Next step is to deliver information/programme to students • Distribute advocacy materials amongst pilgrims • In coordination with the Ministry of Health and charities, establish a mobile tobacco cessation clinic for pilgrims
Syrian Arab Republic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prevent smoking in schools and outside schools by implementing Legislative Decree No. 62 of 2009 regarding the prohibition of smoking • Develop a smoke-free schools initiative in cooperation with the Ministry of Education • Undertake a media campaign during May to prepare for WNTD 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hold a workshop with the National Anti-Smoking Committee and develop a joint action plan to maintain implementation of the decree • Through the Pink Lung Initiative hold activities such as drawing, plays and games for children to raise awareness of the harms of smoking • Undertake campaign through collaboration between the Ministries of Information, Culture, Social Affairs and Labor, and Education



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