

Submission of the President of the Conference of the Parties to the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control to the thematic review of the 2021 United Nations High-level Political Forum

“Sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic that promotes the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development: building an inclusive and effective path for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda in the context of the Decade of Action and delivery for sustainable development.”

15 March 2021

Introduction

The objective of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC) is to protect present and future generations from the devastating health, social, environmental and economic consequences of tobacco consumption and exposure to tobacco smoke.

In force since 2005 and comprising 182 Parties, the Convention reaffirms the right of all people to the highest standard of health. It provides a framework for tobacco control measures to be implemented by Parties – at the national, regional and international levels.

The WHO FCTC also is an accelerator for sustainable development, and as such its implementation has been included as a means of progress towards the achievement of **the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Target 3.4**, which calls for a one-third reduction in premature mortality due to noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) and SDG Target 3.a, which calls for 30% decrease in tobacco use by 15 years and older. **(a) Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the implementation of the SDGs under review in the 2021 HLPF from the vantage point of your intergovernmental body, bearing in mind the interlinkages with other SDGs.**

The focus of governments on the COVID-19 pandemic has often hindered the implementation of the WHO FCTC, but in a handful of countries the attention to some tobacco control measures has increased because of the pandemic. Therefore, the tobacco-related SDGs may have been impacted in different ways.

SDG 1 (No poverty) and SDG 2 (Zero hunger)

Both SDGs are impacted by tobacco use, since over 80% of the 1.3 billion tobacco users live in low- and middle-income countries, and tobacco use diverts household spending from basic needs, such as food and shelter, and also increases health costs. This reality compounds the economic effects of the pandemic, which has taken a greater toll on poor and vulnerable populations.

SDG 3 (Good health and well-being)

The tobacco epidemic continues to be a major public health threat, claiming more than 8 million lives each year. While more than 7 million of those deaths are the result of direct tobacco use, around 1.2 million

deaths are the result of exposure to second-hand smoke. People suffering from NCDs, for which tobacco is a common risk factor, are more vulnerable during the COVID-19 pandemic. Smoking is associated with increased severity of disease and death in hospitalized COVID-19 patients.¹ Some countries have banned the use of tobacco products in public places to decrease the transmission of the virus, with 17 countries in the World Health Organization Eastern Mediterranean Region having banned the use of water pipes in public places.

If this measure is maintained after the pandemic, it will help accelerate progress towards achievement of both the SDG Target 3.4 and Target 3.a (strengthening the implementation of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control). Implementation of Target 3.a has also been uneven. Only 32 Member States are currently on track to achieve the World Health Organization's (WHO) voluntary target of a relative reduction in tobacco use prevalence by 30% between 2010 and 2025.

SDG 8 (Decent work and economic growth)

COVID-19 has deeply impacted economies worldwide. Tobacco is also an economic burden and according to World Bank studies, it is estimated that the global economic cost of smoking is at least US\$ 1.4 trillion annually, or 1.8% of the global gross domestic product. At the same time, while tobacco is considered a generator of employment, there are serious concerns about the dependency of small farmers on the industry, child labour in supply chains, the negative impact on worker health and the environmental consequences of tobacco cultivation. Article.17 of the WHO FCTC calls on Parties to promote economically viable alternatives for tobacco workers, growers and individual sellers. Unfortunately, it is one of the less implemented articles of the Convention.

Investment-case² findings show that if countries do not implement any of the recommended package of tobacco control measures, direct and indirect economic losses are estimated at US\$ 226.75 billion over 15 years. However, if the recommended package of interventions is fully implemented, 15 countries can avoid US\$ 60.13 billion in economic losses over a similar period.

SDG 10 (Reduced inequalities)

There is a strong link between tobacco use and socioeconomic status. Experience in many countries shows that vulnerable populations usually exhibit high levels of tobacco consumption. Unfortunately, COVID-19 has only exposed and increased existing inequalities and have shown that tobacco use and COVID-19 can be a deadly combination.³

SDG 13 (Climate action)

While COVID-19 measures, such as lockdowns and telework, have temporally improved air pollution, tobacco continues to be a serious problem for the environment. From deforestation to soil degradation and pollution, tobacco production and tobacco use by consumers are tremendously destructive for the

¹ https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/WHO-2019-nCoV-Sci_Brief-Smoking-2020.2

² Investment cases conducted by the United Nations Development Programme for the FCTC2030 project

³ <https://ash.org.uk/category/information-and-resources/health-inequalities/#:~:text=There%20is%20a%20strong%20link,smoking%20and%20socio%2Deconomic%20group.&text=Smoking%20accounts%20for%20over%20half,than%20among%20the%20better%20off>

environment. Cigarette butts are the most discarded waste item worldwide, with some 4.5 trillion thrown away each year, representing 1.69 billion pounds of toxic trash annually.

Article 18 of the WHO FCTC calls for the protection of the environment and the health of persons in relation to the environment in respect of tobacco cultivation and manufacture. Again, this article has not been among those most implemented.

SDG 16 (Peace, justice and strong institutions)

Tobacco control measures, as foreseen in the WHO FCTC, contribute to justice, security and good governance. Article 5 of the WHO FCTC calls on Parties to ensure good governance for tobacco control and to avoid undue interference by the tobacco industry in tobacco control public health measures.

The tobacco industry has taken advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic to employ its so-called “corporate social responsibility” strategies, which have been defined by WHO FCTC guidelines for implementation of Article 13 as a form of sponsorship and, therefore, should be banned.

SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals)

The COVID-19 pandemic demands global solidarity and an increase domestic resources to help countries endure the pandemic and recover from it.

SDG Target 17.1 focuses on strengthening domestic resource mobilization, including through international support to developing countries, and improved domestic capacity for tax and other revenue collection.

Article 6 of the WHO FCTC calls for price and tax measures to reduce demand. Tobacco taxation has been identified as an important domestic financial resources to support the overall implementation of the SDGs. The Convention Secretariat has been providing support through the FCTC 2030 project to low- and middle-income countries⁴ to improve their multisectoral approach to tobacco control and to implement WHO FCTC basic measures, including an increase in tobacco taxes.

In looking for partnerships, it is important to remember that there is a fundamental and irreconcilable conflict between the tobacco industry’s interests and public health policy interests.

The Model Policy for Agencies of the United Nations System on Preventing Tobacco Industry Interference, referenced by United Nations Economic and Social Council resolutions E/RES/2017/8 and E/RES/2018/13, has continued to be promoted and implemented. The text encourages members of United Nations agencies to prevent tobacco industry interference, recalling the UN Model Policy, which states that the United Nations must ensure a "consistent and effective separation between its activities and those of the tobacco industry, to preserve its integrity and reputation” and that “engagement with the tobacco industry is contrary to the United Nations system’s objectives, fundamental principles and values”.

⁴ The project itself is a multi-partner approach led by the Convention Secretariat in partnership with the United Nations Development Programme, WHO and civil society.

(b) Actions, policy guidance, progress, challenges and areas requiring urgent attention in relation to the SDGs and to the theme within the area under the purview of your intergovernmental body

The devastating impact of COVID-19 has underscored the fundamental importance of health. While governments are still looking for solutions to strengthen health systems and public health policies, the tobacco industry is exploiting this global health crisis to present itself as a benevolent partner in the fight against the global pandemic, thus obscuring the economic and social costs of tobacco. For example, in the case of COVID-19 vaccines, the tobacco industry has extended support to some governments in the research and financing of vaccines, undermining public health interests and pushing governments to breach Article 5.3 of the WHO FCTC.

In these challenging times, it is essential that Parties to the WHO FCTC remain vigilant and protect their public policies. Therefore, stricter implementation of the WHO FCTC, and particularly Article 5.3 of the WHO FCTC and its guidelines, and requests to Parties to protect tobacco control efforts from the commercial and other vested interests of the tobacco industry should be included in the recovery plans.

(c) An assessment of the situation regarding the principle of “ensuring that no one is left behind” at the global, regional and national levels against of the background of the COVID-19 pandemic in achieving the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, within the respective area addressed by your intergovernmental bodies

The focus of most of the health authorities around the world over the past year has been mainly on the pandemic, hindering advances in tobacco control, while the pandemic itself has disproportionately impacted the more vulnerable populations around the world. This synergy has not improved the goal of leaving no one behind.

(d) Cooperation, measures and commitments at all levels in promoting sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic

International cooperation and coordination among all actors is key to support the implementation of the WHO FCTC, which offers a multisectoral response to the achievement of the SDGs. Furthermore, the involvement of youth in policy-making will strengthen the achievement of a sustainable recovery. The use of tax policies can help both tobacco control and the post-pandemic recovery, decreasing the consumption of tobacco and the burden of tobacco-related diseases while at the same time increasing government revenues.

(e) Various measures and policy recommendations on building an inclusive and effective path for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda in the context of the Decade of Action and delivery for sustainable development

One aspect that must not be overlooked is mobilizing resources and development partners to continue providing intensive support to countries to strengthen implementation of the Convention.

Recommendation 1: Include the implementation of the WHO FCTC in the recovery phase from the COVID-19 pandemic

Governments are advised to strengthen tobacco control measures as part of their COVID-19 response and to integrate implementation of the WHO FCTC in their national development plans. Healthier populations will better be equipped to face the constraints of the post-pandemic times.

Recommendation 2: Implement tobacco cessation programmes and promote smoke-free places

There has never been a better time to quit smoking than during a global pandemic of a respiratory disease, which makes people more aware of the risks of tobacco use. Therefore, measures should be put in place to support those who want to quit tobacco use and protect those who do not smoke from the harmful effects of second-hand smoke and vapors.

Recommendation 3: Apply tax measures

Fiscal measures should be applied – specifically, increased tobacco taxes – to discourage the use of tobacco, thus preventing the onset of new NCDs and providing a greatly needed increase in government revenues.