

**WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION**  
Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean  
**ORGANISATION MONDIALE DE LA SANTE**  
Bureau régional de la Méditerranée orientale



مُنظَّمَةُ الصِّحَّةِ الْعَالَمِيَّةِ  
المكتب الإقليمي شرق المتوسط

**Regional Committee for the  
Eastern Mediterranean**

EM/RC55/INF.DOC.3  
August 2008

**Fifty-fifth Session**

Original: Arabic

**Agenda item 4 (c)**

**Progress report on  
The Tobacco-Free Initiative**

## Contents

1.	Introduction.....	1
2.	New areas of tobacco control.....	1
2.1	The illicit tobacco trade protocol negotiations .....	1
2.2	The Bloomberg Initiative .....	2
3.	Future directions.....	3

## **1. Introduction**

A new era in tobacco control started with the decision of the Second Conference of the Parties of the Framework Convention of Tobacco Control (FCTC) to start the negotiation process for the Convention's first protocol on illicit tobacco trade. The FCTC is entering a new stage by expanding its measures to areas that are outside the direct control of the health sector. The start of the negotiation process calls, more than ever, for the involvement of different national sectors. Regardless of the support provided by health experts in the negotiated protocol, other national sectors should be involved to help ensure national needs are placed high on the agenda of the negotiations.

While the FCTC is developing, tobacco control is also gaining more momentum at the international level. The grants programme of the Bloomberg Initiative provided an opportunity for many countries to plan activities for which funds were never previously available. At the same time, the WHO Report on the Global Tobacco Epidemic 2008 was released with a new set of recommendations by WHO to its Member States for effective tobacco control policies. The contribution of the Bloomberg Philanthropies is recognized to be one of the most important donations ever for tobacco control, not only at international level but also at regional and national levels.

## **2. New areas of tobacco control**

### **2.1 The illicit tobacco trade protocol negotiations**

The first session of the intergovernmental negotiating body (INB) on a protocol on illicit trade in tobacco products was held in Geneva in February 2008. The negotiations focused on a template that was developed by expert groups who were selected on a regional representation basis after the first session of the Conference of the Parties.

Although illicit tobacco trade is perceived as a law enforcement problem, it affects public health directly in several ways. Smuggling undermines high tobacco taxation policy, which is considered to be one of the most effective ways to reduce tobacco consumption. Smuggled cigarettes are sold at lower prices, thus making cigarettes available cheaply. This leads to increased consumption and undermines efforts to keep young people, in particular, from smoking. As well, smuggling deprives governments of billions of dollars in taxation which leads to reduced funding for areas such as public health. Moreover, smuggled and counterfeit cigarettes often elude other regulations as well, such as prohibitions on selling to minors, package warning and other labelling requirements, and regulations on additives.

For these many reasons, getting actively involved and prepared for the negotiations should be one of the top priorities in countries of the Eastern Mediterranean Region. Pre- and post-negotiation discussions at national level should take place with national authorities such as the Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Trade, Customs Department and Ministry of Interior Affairs.

The involvement of these sectors will support not only ensure national needs are reflected in the protocol but will also support the process of negotiations and development of a final protocol that is applicable and that does not contradict other existing international or national legislation.

In the first session of negotiations only 13 of the 16 Member States of the Region that are Parties to the FCTC participated in the negotiations. Although the voting is restricted to Member States that are Parties to the FCTC, other countries may participate as observers and have the right to express opinions about the matters being negotiated.

Also in this session, Oman was selected as the regional representative in the Bureau of the INB, and Saudi Arabia was selected as the regional Member States Coordinator. The Bureau of the INB is independent from the Bureau of the FCTC. The draft text will be ready in June and countries will be asked to review and prepare their discussion points for the next session of negotiations (INB2), to be held in Geneva in October 2008.

It is worth mentioning that a very limited number of Member States of the Region registered for the working groups of the FCTC which are mandated to develop guidelines on the different articles

according to the Second Conference of the Parties. This situation needs to improve in the coming round of work for the FCTC groups after the Third Conference of the Parties. The more Member States registered in these working groups, the better for the Region. The needs and realities of countries of the Region differ from the situation in other countries and regions, and cannot be made visible unless our Member States are actively involved in the FCTC process.

## 2.2 The Bloomberg Initiative

The most important outcome of the Bloomberg Initiative in 2007 was the release of the WHO Report on the Global Tobacco Epidemic and the Bloomberg grants programme. The Report on the Global Tobacco Epidemic, funded by the Bloomberg Philanthropies, presents the first comprehensive analysis of global tobacco use and control efforts, based on data from 179 countries.

The report highlights many alarming facts for the international community. At the same time it proposes a number of recommendations for Member States on fundamental policies needed at national level for successful tobacco control.

The report shows that while progress has been made, not a single country fully implements all key tobacco control measures. Only 5% of the world's population live in countries that fully protect their population with any one of the key measures that reduce smoking rates.

The report reflects the realities of different aspects of tobacco control in the countries that it covers, and strongly recommends six "MPOWER" policies for immediate implementation by WHO Member States. These strategies are summarized as follows.

- Monitor tobacco use and prevention policies. Good monitoring tracks the extent and evolution of the epidemic and indicates how best to tailor policies. Currently, half of countries – and two in three in the developing world – do not have even minimal information about tobacco use. A strong surveillance system is the key solution for this strategy. The Global Tobacco Surveillance System with its 4 components can be a very successful tool for countries of the Eastern Mediterranean Region that are not implementing a monitoring system.
- Protect people from tobacco smoke. The key message is that every person has a right to breathe air free of tobacco smoke. In addition to protecting the health of non-smokers, smoke-free environments encourage smokers to quit. Evidence from pioneering countries shows that smoke-free laws do not harm businesses and are popular with the public. Permitting smoking in designated areas undermines the benefit of smoke-free environments. Only 5% of the global population is protected by comprehensive national smoke-free legislation. Unfortunately, many countries of the Region are implementing tobacco-free policies with designated areas for smoking. This undermines the efforts to meet the recommendation for 100% tobacco-free places. Egypt and the Islamic Republic of Iran have laws that specify 100% tobacco-free public places in selected areas.
- Offer help to quit tobacco use. Among smokers who are aware of the dangers of tobacco, three out of four want to quit. Counselling and medication can double the chance that a smoker who tries to quit will succeed. The integration of cessation services in primary health care can be the direct solution for meeting the recommendation under this point. In this direction, national criteria can be adopted for the beneficiaries of such services. National comprehensive services supporting cessation are available only in 9 countries, representing 5% of the world population. Few countries in the Region have a cessation services that are available to the public.
- Warn about the dangers of tobacco use. Relatively few tobacco users fully grasp the health dangers. Hard-hitting anti-tobacco advertisements and graphic pack warnings reduce the number of children who begin smoking and increase the number of smokers who quit. Pictures are more powerful deterrents than words on tobacco packaging warnings, but only 15 countries, representing 6% of the world's population, mandate pictorial warnings. Just five countries, with 4% of the world's population, meet the highest standards for pack warnings. Only three countries in the Region have legislation in place that supports the placing of pictorial warnings on tobacco packs. Seven other countries are on their way to adopting similar legislation.

- Enforce bans on tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship. Widespread advertising falsely associates tobacco with desirable qualities. Studies have found that advertising bans can lower tobacco consumption. Only 5% of the world's population currently lives in countries with comprehensive national bans on tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship. About half the children of the world live in countries that do not ban free distribution of tobacco products. Five Member States in the Region have a complete ban on tobacco advertising, while others have restrictive policies rather than comprehensive bans.
- Raise taxes on tobacco. Tobacco taxes are the most effective way to reduce tobacco use, especially among young people and the poor. Increasing tobacco taxes by 10% generally decreases tobacco consumption by 4% in high-income countries and by about 8% in low- and middle-income countries. Tobacco tax increases also increase government revenues. Only four countries, representing 2% of the world's population, have tax rates greater than 75% of the retail price. In countries with available information, tobacco tax revenues are more than 500 times higher than spending on tobacco control. In low- and middle-income countries, tobacco tax revenues are more than 9000 and 4000 times higher than spending on tobacco control, respectively. The prices of tobacco products in the Region are relatively low compared to international prices and those in other regions. This matter calls for immediate action in the Region, along with coordination of policy among Member States to deter smuggling.

The six MPOWER policies complement the implementation of the FCTC. Implementing all six policies will help and support Parties to the FCTC in fulfilling their legal obligations under the Convention.

In 2009, there will be a new edition of the GTCR with focus on tobacco-free policies at national and sub-national levels, while a full report is expected again within 3 to 5 years from the date of releasing the first comprehensive report.

The Bloomberg grants programme in its second round granted US\$ 3 million for different proposals in countries of the Region. Negotiations are currently under way for the finalization of contracts. Many proposals from the Region were rejected in the third round. However, proposals worth around US\$ 2 million were accepted. Countries that have not participated in the process will have a final chance in the coming (fourth) round, which is expected to be announced in June/July 2008. The Regional Office will support the efforts of Member States that submit proposals for the fourth round of grants.

### **3. Future directions**

Strengthening the involvement of Member States in the FCTC process and working groups is a priority for the Regional Office, in addition to the continued efforts towards implementing and ratifying the FCTC.

Regarding the negotiations of the INB, it is vital to make use of this unprecedented opportunity for the health sector to exert an influence in an area completely outside its control but nevertheless of great public health importance. For the protocol to have the hoped-for impact, a screening process has to be conducted at national level, led by the Ministry of Health and involving other relevant national authorities, to keep the national delegation well informed during negotiations.

Active engagement in the fourth round of Bloomberg grants should be considered carefully by countries. The Regional Office will support all related efforts. The implementation of already accepted proposals is a priority for the Regional Office. Funds granted in the first three rounds should be used in the most effective, operational and strategic way to complement the overall efforts of tobacco control at the national level.

Countries of the Region are invited to integrate into their policies and plans of action the MPOWER package in a way that will bridge the gaps in existing legislation and strategies at national level.