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Dr Ala Alwan, Assistant Director-General, World Health Organization
The number of people now protected by tobacco control measures is growing at a remarkable pace. The progress made on applying measures that reduce the demand for tobacco is a sign of the increasing impact of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, which continues to be one of the most rapidly embraced, measurably successful treaties in United Nations history.

This report, the third periodic country-level examination of the global tobacco epidemic, identifies the countries that have applied effective tobacco control measures that save lives. These countries can be held up as models of action for the many countries that need to do more to protect their people from the harms of tobacco use. Tobacco continues to kill nearly 6 million people each year, including more than 600,000 non-smokers who die from exposure to tobacco smoke. Up to half of the world’s 1 billion smokers will eventually die of a tobacco-related disease. However, we have the power to change these circumstances.

Over the past two years, 1.1 billion people have become covered by at least one MPOWER measure newly applied at the highest level. This is the result of action taken by 30 countries – over half of them classified as low- or middle-income – which have applied measures that, while requiring relatively little investment, are proven to be highly effective at changing tobacco use patterns and saving lives.

The focus of this report is on warning people about the harms of tobacco use. People have an inherent right to receive this information, and countries have an obligation to provide it. The two main types of warnings are examined: health warning labels on tobacco packages and national anti-tobacco mass media campaigns. Large and graphic warning labels and hard-hitting mass media campaigns have proven effective in reducing tobacco use and encouraging people to quit. This report presents for the first time detailed national-level data collected on a global basis for anti-tobacco mass media campaigns.

The data are impressive. More than 1 billion people now live in countries with legislation that requires large graphic health warnings on every cigarette pack sold in their countries, and 1.9 billion people live in the 23 countries that have aired high-quality national anti-tobacco mass media campaigns within the past two years. It is clear that substantial progress is being made against this deadly product. Low- and middle-income countries have been in the forefront of developing anti-tobacco mass media campaigns, showing that countries can successfully implement this intervention regardless of income classification.

Nevertheless, the tobacco epidemic continues to expand because of ongoing tobacco industry marketing, population growth in countries where tobacco use is increasing, and the extreme addictiveness of tobacco that makes it difficult for people to stop smoking once they start. Although there has been progress, only 19 countries follow best-practice standards by requiring large graphic health warnings on tobacco product packages – none of which are low-income countries. All countries, in partnership with the United Nations, health development agencies and civil society, can and must do more by meeting their commitments under the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control and its corresponding guidelines.

This report appears at a crucial moment in the fight against the growing epidemic of noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) – primarily cancers, diabetes, and cardiovascular and chronic lung diseases – which account for 63% of all deaths worldwide and for which tobacco use is one of the biggest contributing agents. These diseases kill an astounding 36 million people each year, with 80% of deaths occurring in low- and middle-income countries that can least afford them. An estimated 9 million deaths occur below the age of 60 years. On 19–20 September 2011, the United Nations General Assembly will hold its first-ever high-level meeting to consider the threat and impact of noncommunicable diseases on global health and human development. Heads of State will discuss during this meeting in New York how to raise awareness of and plot strategies against this cluster of related diseases that share several risk factors, most notably tobacco use.

Because tobacco use and exposure to tobacco smoke cause a large proportion of global illness and death, tobacco control must be given the high priority it deserves so that we can expand on the successes we have already realized. Consequently, tobacco control measures are expected to be scaled up as a core component of the outcome for the United Nations high-level meeting on NCD’s.

As Dr Margaret Chan, Director-General of the World Health Organization has said, “What gets measured gets done”. This report is a strong and important step in our ongoing measurement of what has been achieved in tobacco control and how much more countries need to do. We can and must continue this work – millions of people’s lives are at stake.

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