

35 countries announced a new commitment in tobacco control measures

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By Manjari Peiris

This week 35 countries in the Americas announced a new commitment to accelerating progress in implementing proven tobacco control measures that will save lives and improve public health throughout the region.



WHO - Head Dr. Tedros Adhanom

The resolution was adopted at the 29th Pan American Sanitary Conference in Washington, D.C and outlines a vision for the Americas from 2018-2022.

The Conference is the supreme governing authority of the Organization and meets every five years to determine its general policies. The Conference also serves as a forum for the interchange of information and ideas relating to the prevention of disease; the preservation, promotion and restoration of mental and physical health; and the advancement of sociomedical measures and facilities for the prevention and treatment of physical and mental diseases in the Western Hemisphere.

Renewed Effort Will Save Lives, Improve Public Health not only in Americas, but also in low-and middle-income countries

Tobacco use remains a major public health problem. It is the main preventable risk factor for the four main groups of non-communicable diseases (NCDs). In 2012, NCDs were responsible for almost 80 percent of all deaths in the Region of the Americas 35 percent of which were premature (occurring between the ages of 30 and 70). Tobacco control is therefore key to reducing premature mortality from these diseases.

The World Health Organization's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) contains all the measures proven effective in reducing the smoking epidemic. However, 12 years since its entry into force and despite the fact that 30 Member States of the Region are Parties to the Convention, its measures have not been uniformly implemented by the countries. Furthermore, implementation is slowing. This document offers a roadmap for prioritizing key provisions of the Convention that will enable the Member States to accelerate its implementation to meet targets established for the reduction of tobacco use and premature deaths from NCDs.

The Strategy and Plan of Action is aligned with the commitments of the States Parties to the FCTC and with the Declaration of Port-of-Spain of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) (2007), the Political Declaration of the High-level Meeting of the United Nations General Assembly (2011), the PAHO Strategic Plan 2014-2019, the Global Plan of Action for the Prevention and Control of NCDs 2013-2020 and the Regional Plan of Action 2013-2019, and the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The commitment made by these countries is an example of what other countries can do together to take on the global tobacco epidemic. More than 80 percent of the world's smokers live in low-and middle-income countries, particularly in Southeast Asia. Adopting similar measures would save countless lives and protect generations for years to come.

The resolution urges all countries in the Americas to adopt national smoke-free laws and warning labels on tobacco products no later than 2022. Additionally, the resolution calls for a particular focus on strengthening laws that ban tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship. These measures are in line with the world's international public health treaty, the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, which obligates 181 parties to adopt proven strategies to curb the crushing global burden of tobacco-related death and disease.

In addition to these life-saving measures, the resolution calls for countries to oppose attempts by the tobacco industry and its front groups to delay, hinder or impede the implementation of tobacco control measures designed to protect public health. In the Americas and around the world, the tobacco industry and its allies remain the single greatest obstacle to progress in combating tobacco use. From suing countries to lobbying against life-saving laws, the industry leaves no stone unturned in fighting against measures tobacco companies know will reduce smoking.

Despite intense opposition from a powerful tobacco industry, the Americas have long been a leader in public health. Across Latin America, 18 countries have adopted smoke-free laws and 21 countries or jurisdictions require warning labels to cover at least 30 percent of tobacco packaging. Additionally, countries like Uruguay have set an example for low- and middle-income countries around the world by standing up to legal attacks against proven tobacco control laws.

The FCTC contains all the measures necessary for reducing the smoking epidemic. Full and comprehensive implementation of these measures should be the objective of all States Parties. The WHO Global Plan of Action for the Prevention and Control of NCDs 2013-2020 has prioritized four FCTC interventions, known as “best buys,” classifying them as highly cost-effective measures that can be implemented even in contexts of limited resources.

These measures, which include FCTC Article 6 (raising taxes on tobacco products), Article 8 (smoke-free environments), Article 11 (large graphic health warnings on the packaging of tobacco products), and Article 13 (prohibition of advertising, promotion, and sponsorship of tobacco), can be considered the starting point for comprehensive implementation of the Convention. The fact that the four measures require legislation for their implementation, in turn, makes it easy to monitor the indicators, which are already being compiled biennially for the WHO Report on the Global Tobacco Epidemic. Since the FCTC's international entry into force in 2005, the tobacco control picture in the Region has changed dramatically, with many countries adopting legislative and regulatory measures aligned with the mandates of the Convention. However, progress has been uneven in terms of the type of measures and number of countries that have adopted them and the adoption of these measures has slowed in recent years.

Exposure to tobacco smoke causes disease and death. Thus, protecting people from this exposure promotes “the right to the highest attainable standard of health.” Effective measures include a total ban on smoking and should cover at least all enclosed public and work spaces and public transportation; they could include other semi-enclosed or open public spaces, pursuant to each country's needs.

Posting health warnings on the packaging of tobacco products is essential for raising public awareness about the

effects of tobacco use on health.

Article 11 of the FCTC and its Guidelines state that health warnings should meet certain criteria to ensure their maximum visibility along with rotating images and messages in the main language(s) spoken in the country. Furthermore, the packaging should not contain any element, such as the words “mild,” and “light,” that could lead to the mistaken conclusion that the product in question is less harmful than another and should provide qualitative information on its components and emissions. The Region’s most advanced countries in this respect – Canada and Uruguay – have health warnings that respectively cover 75% and 80% of the main exposed surfaces.

Neutral or plain packaging is a measure designed to restrict or prohibit the use of logos, colors, trademark imagery, and/or promotional information other than the brand or product name, which should appear in a nondescript color and font. This measure not only increases the visibility of the health warnings but makes the product less appealing and eliminates the possibility of using the packaging as advertising. The Member States can also consider the adoption of a standardized format per brand name, as Uruguay does (allowing one format for every brand of tobacco product), to ensure that variants of the brand name are not used to create the mistaken idea that some variants are less harmful than others.

The adopted resolution demonstrates an unwavering resolve to address the enormous toll of tobacco use – and the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids stands ready to assist countries in making progress in this ambitious plan. The resolution set forth by the Americas should serve as a model to other nations and regions around the world of what countries can achieve together in the fight against tobacco use. Without urgent action by more governments, tobacco use will kill one billion people around the world this century.

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Source of information: Patricia Sosa, Director of Latin America and Caribbean Programs - Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids

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