



REGIONAL WORKSHOP ON TOBACCO CONTROL AND TRADE

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OPENING REMARKS

It is my pleasure to welcome you to the first regional workshop that tackles the issue of trade and its relation to tobacco control. For the first time and through this workshop, we are able to gather in one forum, experts from the health, commerce and trade sectors to discuss this important issue in detail. And, to also allow ourselves to brainstorm on possible future collaboration regarding tobacco control in the context of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) and other international treaties that regulate global trade and commerce.

Since its adoption in 2003, the WHO FCTC – through its many perspectives – brought tobacco control to the center of attention in many sectors, including trade, finance and commerce. With the WHO FCTC, tobacco control became not only a health priority but a multidimensional and multifaceted policy intervention that has implications on various other policies in the areas of finance, trade and commerce. The interaction and harmonization between these different sectors became a necessity in order to achieve the comprehensiveness needed in successful tobacco control both at national and regional levels.

This multisectoral commitment that was flagged by the WHO FCTC for the first time was reiterated by the recently developed *International protocol to curb illicit trade in tobacco products* which was adopted by the Parties to the WHO FCTC in November 2012; a non-health protocol that evolved from the Convention. Once entered into force, the trade and customs sector will have major responsibilities to develop effective systems to monitor and track tobacco trade movement across the globe, starting from national level; which will be an essential part of tobacco control worldwide.

Our gathering in this workshop will pave the way for good understanding of the treaty and its first protocol by the trade sector; which will undoubtedly lead to better implementation of both the Convention and its protocol at national level.

Tobacco products are deadly products. Yet, unfortunately, they are still legal across the globe and, as we all know, continue to be marketed for by the tobacco industry. There is strong cumulative evidence of the tobacco industry's rigorous involvement in using its linkages and relations to lure governments through foreign direct investments, and using all possible political and global trade forums to undermine efforts to curb its use. We have seen from the documents of the tobacco industry evidence of such activities in this Region; terms such as "using our oil links" were quoted more than once in the papers, indicating that the tobacco industry is manipulating legal processes to achieve its aims and objectives in promoting its deadly products.

Today, the tobacco industry continues to exert all its efforts to undermine the implementation and the impact of the WHO FCTC, by thwarting the provisions of other international trade agreements and trade liberalization. The tobacco industry is relentless in its efforts to create a false reality about the WHO FCTC being in contradiction with such agreements. The most recent example was when the industry attempted to legally oppose decisions made by the Australian government in favour of strong trade-related measures to curb tobacco use; the Australian government however succeeded in derailing the case filed by the tobacco industry to undermine plain packaging legislation on tobacco products. Similarly, Uruguay fought back, successfully implementing packaging and labeling measures as mandated by the WHO FCTC.

One of the key goals of this workshop is to support our Member States in facing the challenges posed by the tobacco industry that is using trade-related treaties like the WTO Agreements, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade and the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights to undermine the movement of tobacco control at national level.

This forum has been organized to provide an opportunity to health and trade experts from the Eastern Mediterranean Region to sit together and have a detailed discourse of the WHO FCTC, WTO Agreements and other international treaties related to tobacco trade and commerce. We have experts who will help to clarify the salient provisions of these international agreements and the linkages between these and the WHO FCTC. This will not be the only event that the Regional Office organizes in this direction; this workshop will be followed by other sub-regional and national activities to keep the momentum going and to tackle certain challenges in the field.

At the end, let me assure you again that we have strong evidence that tobacco control is a win-win policy for all sectors of the government, including trade and commerce. Governments across the globe have gained not only in terms of health but also in terms of revenue generation by implementing stronger tobacco control measures, including trade regulations for tobacco products, coupled with improved taxation policies. We desire and hope for a similar approach from the countries of our Region; this workshop is the first step towards that.

I thank you for your time and effort to participate in this important forum. I certainly hope that the outcomes of this forum will help your countries to be better prepared to implement multisectoral tobacco control policies to the benefit of society.

Thank you.