

27 May 2015 | Cairo, Egypt – On World No Tobacco Day, 31 May, the World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean is calling on countries to stop the illicit trade of tobacco products, by committing to, and becoming Party to the Protocol to Eliminate Illicit Trade in Tobacco Products. “Ratifying, accepting, approving or acceding to the Protocol,” says WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean Dr Ala Alwan, “is the starting point to saving lives lost to tobacco”.

Tobacco use kills nearly six million people every year, including the 600 000 who are killed by the effects of exposure to second-hand smoke. Tobacco use is one of the main risk factors for a number of chronic diseases, including cancer, lung diseases and cardiovascular diseases. Negative health impacts are associated with the use of all types of tobacco, including cigarettes, waterpipes and smokeless tobacco. The adverse health effects of tobacco use are also experienced by non-smokers exposed to second-hand smoke. Long-term exposure to second-hand smoke increases the risk of lung cancer, coronary heart disease and respiratory problems.

The illicit trade increases tobacco use

Cigarettes, shisha and smokeless tobacco are being smuggled across borders. These illicit products are untaxed and unregulated, with no health warnings, packaging or labeling requirements; which makes them cheaper, more readily available and accessible, especially to young and poor people.

Affordability and accessibility lead to increased use, this downward spiral into poverty and illness because of money spent on tobacco, and additional money spent on treating its ill-health effects, has dire health and economic consequences.

“Tobacco use in many countries in the Eastern Mediterranean Region is very high,” adds Dr Alwan, “with up to 36% of adolescents (13–15 years) and 32% of adults (15 years and older) using tobacco. The illicit trade of tobacco products increases tobacco use among youth and other age groups”.

Governments are bearing the brunt

Every year, governments lose US\$ 40.5 billion in revenue from the illicit trade of tobacco

products. In some countries, illicit trade can reach as high as 40–50% of the overall tobacco market. “Our countries are at risk,” says Dr Alwan, “as the illicit tobacco trade is more prominent in low- and middle-income countries than in high-income countries”.

While cigarettes remain by far the most frequent illicit tobacco products, in just one year, the amount of smuggled smokeless tobacco seized has risen from 8 to 38 tonnes. Shisha tobacco seizures rose from 69 to 75 tonnes – unprecedented increases from 2012 to 2013.

Eliminating the illicit trade would gain governments at least US\$ 31.3 billion every year, and from 2030 onwards more than 164 000 premature deaths every year would be avoided, the vast majority in middle- and low-income countries.

The invisible hand of the tobacco industry

The tobacco industry is involved in the illicit tobacco trade. Tobacco companies have been known to use loopholes in tobacco control governance systems and control the illicit trade of tobacco products. Since 2004, the four major international tobacco companies have paid billions of dollars in fines and payments to settle cigarette smuggling litigation in Europe and Canada. The tobacco industry has claimed that high taxes drive smuggling and has sometimes argued successfully to governments that they should not increase tobacco tax because this will increase the level of smuggling. The argument is that smugglers will smuggle into a country where they can make the highest profit, and that these are the countries where tax represents a high proportion of the price, leaving a large margin to reduce the price (by evading tax) and still retain a profit.

“In fact,” explains Dr Alwan, “the overall level of smuggling is generally higher in countries that have lower cigarette prices (generally also countries with a lower tax rate) than in countries that have high prices”. Analyses have shown that high levels of illicit tobacco products are linked more closely to corruption and tolerance of contraband sales.

The global trade in illicit tobacco products occurs in low tax as well as high tax jurisdictions, results from a lack of control on cigarette manufacturing and the movement of cigarettes across international borders, and is run by criminal organizations with sophisticated systems for distributing smuggled cigarettes. Illicit trade is more common in low-income than in high-income countries.

The Protocol to Eliminate Illicit Trade in Tobacco Products is the starting point

This Protocol to the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control is the first international legal instrument that provides countries with guidance on political, technical and international collaboration, needed to eliminate the illicit trade in tobacco products. “Eliminating the illicit trade of tobacco products,” explains WHO Regional Director Dr Alwan, “will increase tobacco product prices, lower consumption, reduce premature deaths, and increase government revenues”. Ratification, acceptance, approval or accession to the Protocol to Eliminate Illicit Trade in Tobacco Products is the starting point.

Commit to the Protocol on this World No Tobacco Day.

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