

Hard-hitting anti-tobacco ads and graphic warnings on cigarette packs reduce the number of children who begin smoking and increase the number of smokers who quit. However, only 15 countries, representing 6% of the world's population, mandate pictorial warnings, the first WHO report on the global tobacco epidemic reveals.

The report, recently issued by WHO and the Arabic version of which is launched today by the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, presents the first comprehensive data on global tobacco use and control efforts. It shows that currently, most of the countries in the world do not have adequate information about tobacco use and trends, despite the fact that good monitoring tracks the extent and evolution of the epidemic and indicates how best to tailor policies.

The report also shows that only 5% of the world's population is protected by comprehensive national smoke-free legislation and that, while progress has been made, not a single country fully implements all the key tobacco control measures. The reports outlines an approach that governments can adopt to prevent tens of millions of premature deaths by the middle of this century.

“This report comes at the right time. Tobacco remains the biggest killer, yet the most preventable cause of death worldwide. WHO estimates suggest that tobacco use is responsible for 5.4 million deaths per year globally— 70% of these deaths take place in developing countries. Tobacco could kill one billion people in the 21st century, unless governments start acting now to reduce consumption in their countries. This report is a call to governments to act comprehensively to control this epidemic”, remarked Dr Hussein

A. Gezairy, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean. “Comprehensive tobacco control means having stringent laws to regulate the product; it means creating social hostility towards tobacco; and it means taking steps to ensure implementation of legislation. The MPOWER package will enable countries to achieve this”, he added.

Dr Fatimah El Awa, Regional Adviser for Tobacco Control said the “MPOWER package is needed to fight tobacco”. She added “We have come a long way in our struggle to control this epidemic. We now have solid evidence on which to base our interventions. We have six effective policies for governments to use and so bring about a powerful response to the tobacco epidemic”.

The report introduces a package of six evidence based policy “MPOWER” which governments must undertake if they are to fulfil their promise to bring about effective tobacco control.

These six MPOWER policies are:

- Monitor tobacco use and prevention policies
- Protect people from tobacco smoke
- Offer help to quit tobacco use
- Warn about the dangers of tobacco
- Enforce bans on tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship

- Raise taxes on tobacco

The MPOWER report reveals that only 5% of the world's population live in countries that fully protect their population with any of the key tobacco control measures. The report also reveals that governments around the world collect 500 times more money in tobacco taxes each year than they spend on anti-tobacco efforts. It finds that tobacco taxes, the single most effective strategy, could be significantly increased in nearly all countries, providing a source of sustainable funding to implement and enforce comprehensive tobacco control.

In the Eastern Mediterranean Region, some countries have set successful examples in some of the important policy interventions. Egypt and Jordan have pictorial health warnings on the cigarette packs, receiving very promising initial response. Other countries are following, Qatar, Egypt, Iran, and Djibouti have moved towards a comprehensive ban on advertising. The Gulf Cooperation Council has adopted a policy to raise taxation on tobacco products.

WHO has also launched a global tobacco surveillance system in the countries to monitor the prevalence of tobacco use across the world. The first of several comprehensive surveys, the Global Adult Tobacco Survey is planned to be conducted in Egypt by the end of 2008.

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