

His Excellency the Minister of Health and Population Dr Adel Adawy; representatives of the Ministry of Finance and Tax Authority, Chairman of the Dr Mostafa Abdel Kader and the Minister's Assistant, Mr Mamdouh Omar; distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

Good morning.

First of all, I would like to thank the Ministry of Health and Population for organizing this timely event that focuses on tobacco use, the single most preventable cause of death. I also would like to recognize the Ministry of Finance and the Tax Authority, the Ministry of Supply and Internal Trade, the Customs Authority, the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics, academia from Cairo/Ein Shams and Alexandria Universities, civil society organizations and the heads of the public governmental hospitals for being here today to support this important event.

It gives me great pleasure to be here today and support the release of three landmark studies on tobacco in Egypt. The studies' findings present the first evidence-based data on some of the major economic challenges facing tobacco control in Egypt; the tobacco health cost, illicit tobacco trade and shisha and smokeless tobacco use amongst the youth.

Tobacco use worldwide results in nearly six million deaths each year. It affects the most vulnerable people in our communities, in particularly the poor and the young. It not only impoverishes many of its users, but it puts an enormous financial burden on their families and the economies in which they live. This includes increased health-care costs, and lost productivity due to illness and premature death.

The studies released today provide valuable evidence on the tobacco burden in Egypt, enabling policy-makers to make informed decisions. I congratulate the Ministry of Health and Population and all of the other partners involved in producing these findings, as they will further guide tobacco control in Egypt.

The results of the study on the tobacco health cost to the country reflect what we already know to be true globally – tobacco is a driving force in the rising epidemic of chronic diseases such as lung disease, lung cancer, ischaemic heart disease and stroke. This places increasing pressure

on Egypt's health system, and a significant economic burden on society and the individual.

The second study released today reveals that illicit trade of tobacco has become a major problem for Egypt. The illicit cigarette market share increased dramatically from 2% in 2009 to nearly 20% in 2013. Not only does this represent a significant threat to public health by increasing the access to cheaper tobacco products, especially to the poor and young; it also diminishes government revenue, representing an estimated loss of nearly 4 billion Egyptian pounds in 2013 alone.

The final study focuses on the use of tobacco products by university students, and particularly addresses the rising use of shisha. As we look around the streets it is clear that shisha is growing in popularity in Egypt and the Region. This study revealed that 16.5% of students use tobacco products, which is a higher prevalence than found in adults. Three quarters of these users combine both cigarettes and shisha. Shisha smoking is an attractive social activity with high peer pressure to take part. This provides a dangerous path to tobacco addiction for all, including women and girls.

Sadly and surprisingly students are spending 54% of their income on tobacco products, revealing what a high priority they place on this addiction over other healthier activities and goods. It is clear that more needs to be done to protect young people in Egypt from the dangers of tobacco.

What does this all mean for Egypt? In 2005 Egypt was one of the first signatories of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control. Egypt has since made impressive progress, including putting warning labels on cigarette packets, and raising tobacco taxes. The leadership of the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Finance along with other ministries and civil society is well recognized in these efforts.

However, many challenges remain, some of them clearly underlined by these studies. Egypt has a high prevalence of smokers with 46% of adult men smoking and an increasing number of young female smokers. Nearly half of the population is exposed to second hand smoke in their homes. Public places are still not tobacco free, including hospitals and education facilities. And now many movies are increasingly showing actors smoking, which appeals to young people.

This is not without recognition of Egypt authorities that more needs to be done. The many partners, who supported the studies, and have joined today's launching are a tribute to increased recognition that further action is required to reduce tobacco consumption in the country.

The landmark findings presented today provide an opportunity for policy-makers and the tobacco control community to translate data into action through reviewing and updating national policies and programmes in different areas of tobacco control based on these results.

Further increase of taxation of tobacco products, including shisha, remains the most effective way to reduce tobacco use without losing revenues and creates a win-win situation. A higher cost of tobacco products reduces consumption, especially among the young and poor, while also increasing government revenue, which can then be used to offset budget gaps in the health sector, including supporting plans to revitalize social health insurance.

In addition to this, Egypt needs to address passive smoking through the introduction of smoke-free environments in order to provide citizens places to be free from tobacco exposure. Secondhand smoking is a major challenge for Egypt. It is unfair for children to be exposed to passive smoking in the home. Hospitals and government buildings in particular should be the first places to be made tobacco free.

Egypt can also fight illicit trade by signing and implementing the Protocol to Eliminate Illicit Trade in Tobacco. And banning tobacco advertising can help to reduce smoking amongst young people. These are just a few measures that are part of an effective package to control tobacco.

As we can see, the challenges to reduce the burden of tobacco are formidable, and the task immense. The fight to achieve effective tobacco control is a long and hard one. But through the use of proven measures we can ensure that this fight will ultimately bring important health and economic gains to Egypt and, most importantly, will save many lives.

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