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Progress report on the Roadmap of actions to strengthen the implementation of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control in the European Region 2015–2025

This report provides an overview of implementation of the Roadmap of actions to strengthen the implementation of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control in the European Region 2015–2025, in line with resolution EUR/RC65/R4.

It is submitted to the 68th session of the WHO Regional Committee for Europe in 2018.

Background

1. This report provides information on progress made since 2015, when the WHO Regional Committee for Europe adopted the Roadmap of actions to strengthen the implementation of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control in the European Region 2015–2025 in resolution EUR/RC65/R4. The Roadmap contributes to the delivery of the vision and mission of Health 2020, the European health policy framework and strategy for the 21st century.
2. With the adoption of the Roadmap, Member States have taken a further decisive step towards fully implementing the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC) across the Region. The Roadmap charts the way to achieving the voluntary global target of a minimum 30% relative reduction in the prevalence of current tobacco use in persons aged 15 years and over by 2025.
3. Tobacco use continues to kill millions of people in the WHO European Region and globally. The European Region has the highest proportion of deaths attributable to tobacco use of all WHO regions, while Europe also has the highest prevalence of tobacco smoking among adults globally. Current trends suggest that tobacco use is not decreasing as quickly as required to meet the globally agreed target. At the same time, there have been some countries in the Region which have witnessed spectacular reductions in tobacco smoking in recent years, such as the Russian Federation and Ukraine.
4. The Roadmap draws on, and is aligned with, the articles of the WHO FCTC, as well as the guidelines for their implementation and policy options and decisions adopted by the Conference of the Parties to the WHO FCTC (COP). The Roadmap takes into account the existing global policy frameworks, notably the WHO Global Action Plan for the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases 2013–2020, and the decision taken by the COP at its sixth session in 2014 to strengthen the contribution by the COP to achieving the noncommunicable disease global target on reduction of tobacco use (decision FCTC/COP6(16)).

Roadmap of actions to strengthen the implementation of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control in the European Region 2015–2025

5. In 2018 the Regional Committee will mark the end of the first three year period of implementation by the Regional Office and Member States of the Roadmap, for which significant support has been provided by the Government of Turkmenistan and the geographically dispersed office in Moscow, Russian Federation.
6. The Roadmap envisions a European Region that is free of tobacco related morbidity, mortality and addiction. Strengthening implementation of the WHO FCTC and other relevant tobacco-control measures in the Region through the Roadmap would also help to achieve an appropriate response to the mandate set out in the Ashgabat Declaration on the Prevention and Control of Noncommunicable Diseases in the Context of Health 2020, ensure that no Member State is left behind, and help in the meeting of time-bound commitments under the WHO FCTC.

7. The three focus areas of the Roadmap, underpinned by two cross cutting supporting areas, are listed below. Each of them proposes a set of recommendations for Member States and a set of actions for the Regional Office.

8. The present report describes and illustrates progress made to date by Member States and by the Regional Office in each of the focus areas and cross-cutting supporting areas of the Roadmap:

- Strengthening implementation of the WHO FCTC and supporting innovation
- Responding to new challenges
- Reshaping social norms
- Assessing progress, gaps, gradients, trends and impact
- Working together: partnerships and international cooperation

Focus area 1: Strengthening implementation of the WHO FCTC and supporting innovation

9. Progress has been made across the Region since the adoption of the Roadmap in implementation of the WHO FCTC. Six countries fully aligned their national tobacco control legislation with the WHO FCTC in 2016–2017 despite the opposition of the tobacco industry. In several other countries tobacco control has been strengthened, with new policies and better enforcement and compliance. More needs to be done, however, especially on raising tobacco taxes, implementing smoke-free policies, supporting people to quit, providing warnings of the dangers of tobacco use through the mass media, and enforcing bans on all forms of promotion.

10. Article 6 of the WHO FCTC, on using price and tax measures to reduce the demand for tobacco, raise revenue and address inequities, is identified by the Roadmap as a priority. Several countries in the Region continue to regularly raise taxes and prices on tobacco products, thereby ensuring that they become less affordable, and thus serve as good examples to other countries. The Regional Office has published several country case studies on successful tobacco tax policies leading to less tobacco use and more revenue. However, it is also one of the policy measures for which progress has slowed in the Region, partly because of the tobacco industry's lobbying and a lack of intersectoral collaboration on tobacco control at the country level.

11. Since 2016, the Regional Office has provided a regional annual platform for discussing country successes, lessons learned in implementation of the WHO FCTC and emerging new challenges (in Turkmenistan in 2016 and Germany in 2017). The last such meeting focused on two key topics in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals: tobacco taxation and policy coherence in tobacco control. Given the fact that countries in south-eastern Europe face similar challenges, these countries have also been convened annually to discuss common pressing topics (in Montenegro in 2016 and Croatia in 2017).

12. Other key areas of tobacco control need to be strengthened, including efforts to eliminate the illicit trade in tobacco products and implementation of Article 5.3 of the WHO FCTC on protecting tobacco-control policies from commercial and other vested interests of the tobacco industry. By the end of January 2018, 12 European countries and the European

Union had ratified the Protocol to Eliminate Illicit Trade in Tobacco Products out of 35 ratifications globally. In order to encourage ratification of the Protocol, a technical intersectoral meeting was organized together with the Secretariat of the WHO FCTC (Convention Secretariat) in late 2017 in Georgia for representatives of the public health, customs, trade, justice and foreign affairs sectors of the 11 newly independent states.

Focus area 2: Responding to new challenges

13. New challenges have emerged since the WHO FCTC was adopted, including a growth in electronic nicotine delivery systems, heated tobacco products and smokeless tobacco, and new legal and trade challenges to tobacco control.

14. While the public health dispute on the benefits and harms of electronic nicotine delivery systems continues, it is essential that their use in the Region is monitored, that the evidence around their use is strengthened and that all Member States provide comprehensive, evidence-based tobacco cessation support.

15. Threats of litigation in international trade and investment tribunals have emerged in the context of tobacco control as well as other risk factors for noncommunicable diseases. Several Member States, including France, Norway and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, have upheld the legality of tobacco control legislation following challenges from the tobacco industry. The European Court of Justice has also upheld the European Union's directive on tobacco products. Along with other efforts around the world, these set precedents and provide useful lessons for countries facing legal challenges from the tobacco lobby. Given the tactics of the industry, the Regional Office, together with two leading European nongovernmental organizations, organized a workshop in November 2017 to support legal work in tobacco control by sharing information on policy design and tobacco industry opposition, and on past and current legal challenges.

16. Policy-makers need to be equipped with clear facts and well-founded arguments to counter the myths generated by the tobacco industry. However, no single source has yet provided the resources necessary to understand the tactics and arguments of the tobacco industry and to enable governments and the public health community to respond effectively. The Regional Office has therefore developed an online resource, the Tobacco Control Playbook, in English and Russian, which was launched at the Regional Committee in 2016.

Focus area 3: Reshaping social norms

17. While tobacco use remains more prevalent in the Region than it should, it is not standard: most people do not smoke. People at risk from the harms of tobacco – those who currently use it, might start using it or are at risk from second-hand smoke – should be aware that tobacco use is not the social norm.

18. Implementing strong tobacco control measures influences public opinion, especially enacting smoke-free legislation, transmitting the right messages, supporting cessation, educating people before they start to use tobacco products, and protecting policy-making across all sectors from commercial and other vested interests of the tobacco industry.

19. Presentation matters. This is why more and more countries in the European Region are introducing mandatory standardized packaging for tobacco products. The Region is leading the way globally, with seven countries having already adopted such standardized packaging and several more on their way to doing so. International evidence suggests that standardized packaging reduces the appeal of tobacco products, particularly among young people, increases the effectiveness of health warnings and minimizes the use of misleading product descriptor language on the harmful effects of smoking. In June 2016, the Regional Office, the Norwegian Cancer Society and the McCabe Centre for Law and Cancer (Australia) jointly conducted a workshop on legal issues relating to the implementation of standardized tobacco packaging in Europe. The workshop enabled participants to share knowledge and experience, and strengthen networks critical to the successful development and implementation of standardized packaging.

20. Much needs to be done in this focus area in the European Region. According to the 2017 WHO report on the global tobacco epidemic, only five countries have achieved the recommended comprehensiveness of a ban on tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship, 30 have no (or no reported) national mass media campaign, and 40 have yet to implement the recommended level of smoke-free policies, with more work needed on removing smoke-free exemptions. Article 5.3 of the WHO FCTC is another crucial element of this focus area and more needs to be done to obtain Region-wide commitment to its implementation.

21. The Regional Office has developed a series of fact sheets for the 11 newly independent states and nine countries of south-eastern Europe. The fact sheets demonstrate the positive health impact of strong tobacco control policies consistent with the WHO FCTC. The abridged version of the SimSmoke tobacco control model was also used to project the reductions in smoking prevalence and smoking-attributable deaths resulting from implementation of tobacco control policies (individually and in combination).

Supporting area 1: Assessing progress, gaps, gradients, trends and impact

22. Surveillance is crucial to inform evidence generation and drive progress in tobacco control: what gets measured gets done. The European Region has done well in monitoring tobacco control, according to the 2017 WHO report on the global tobacco epidemic, with nearly three-quarters of countries now achieving the recommended level. For this to be translated into even more effective tobacco control, however, it needs to include policy monitoring, be disaggregated by factors such as measures of equity, and be used effectively to influence sustainable policy implementation.

23. The Regional Office is making progress in strengthening the effective use of data. For example, 12 European countries attended global tobacco survey workshops in 2016 and 2017, coordinated jointly by the Regional Office and the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, that examined ways of turning data into action. Repeat Global Adult Tobacco Surveys were conducted in the Russian Federation and Ukraine, with technical and funding support from the Regional Office. The results showed that these countries have witnessed a significant relative decline of around 20% in adult tobacco use in the last five to six years as a result of comprehensive tobacco control policies. A study led by the Regional Office is also in

progress in several countries across the Region, using natural experiment study techniques to help improve evaluation of the impact of public health interventions such as tobacco control.

Supporting area 2: Working together: partnerships and international cooperation

24. In an interdependent world, and given the global and regional forces challenging people's health, the need for countries to act together becomes increasingly important; this is especially so in tobacco control, considering the cross-border activities of the tobacco industry. Since the adoption of the Roadmap, collaboration has been renewed with two European umbrella nongovernmental organizations, namely the Smoke Free Partnership and the European Network for Smoking and Tobacco Prevention.

25. The Regional Office supports collaboration across countries and tobacco-control partners through multicountry tobacco surveillance workshops and research initiatives, and improving coordination of the WHO collaborating centres. The cross-sectoral nature of tobacco control and variations in prevalence and policies across the Region, however, mean that more needs to be done to ensure that sectors work together to reduce tobacco use and that support is provided between countries and regionally to help achieve a European Region free from tobacco-related morbidity, mortality and addiction.

Collaborating centres

26. WHO collaborating centres for tobacco control in Germany, the Netherlands, Poland and Spain have made contributions to the implementation of the Roadmap in its focus areas. For the first time, in September 2017 the Regional Office gathered all the relevant Europe based collaborating centres for a strategic discussion on collaboration so far and joint planning for 2018–2019.

Conclusions and future plans

27. While much work still has to be done to reach the recommended level of tobacco control in the European Region and, ultimately, to attain a tobacco-free Region, much has been achieved so far. There are many examples of exceptional tobacco control achievements that other countries and regions can learn from.

28. Since the adoption of the Roadmap, the Secretariat has been working on tobacco control with more than 40 Member States. Requests for such collaboration from Member States continue to be received, demonstrating the commitment across the Region to scaling up implementation of the WHO FCTC.

29. In the context of the Roadmap, highlights of WHO's work include: supporting countries to counter tobacco industry arguments (through a web-based playbook of arguments); setting forth the evidence on tobacco tax policies (using country case studies); developing innovative tools to measure policy compliance (testing to begin soon on crowd-sourcing for policy compliance); and thinking beyond health (involving the legal and trade sectors in tobacco control capacity building and strengthening regional networks).

30. The Regional Office will continue to implement the Roadmap in full alignment with and under the guidance of Member States and in close collaboration with the Convention Secretariat. The next progress report will be presented to the Regional Committee in 2022.

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