

EDITORIAL

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Reversing the Noncommunicable Disease Epidemic in the South-East Asia Region through Effective Tobacco Control

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World Health Organization (WHO) South-East Asia (SEA) Region is home to around 1.97 billion people, nearly one-fourth of the world's population, and is thus central to global health and well-being (WHO, 2019). The Region has been making all-inclusive and sustainable progress around the flagship health programmes since 2014. The regional flagship programmes are in alignment with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for Health, and WHO's global targets for a billion more people benefitting from universal health coverage, a billion more enjoying better health and well-being, and a billion more better protected from health emergencies.

Evidently, advancing health and development across the Member countries is incumbent on reversing rising rates of noncommunicable diseases (NCDs), which is one of the flagship health programmes of the Region. As economies develop and lifestyles change, the burden of NCDs such as cardiovascular diseases and diabetes is rapidly increasing, and is projected to do so for the foreseeable future (WHO, 2018). In line with the SDGs, the Region is striving towards achieving a one-third reduction in premature deaths caused by NCDs by 2030. Effective tobacco control across the countries of the Region would significantly contribute to achieving this target (Niessen et al, 2018). More specifically, "Best Buys" for tobacco control are the proven cost-effective measures to reduce demand of tobacco at the country level (WHO, 2017a).

The Region is striving to "sustain" gains, "accelerate" sustainable progress, and "innovate" to advance health of billions since February 2019. In context of NCDs, the countries remain committed to sustain high-level political commitment to beat NCDs, to accelerate implementation of multisectoral NCDs plans addressing health impact of environment, climate change, tobacco, lifestyle and diet, and to innovate to promote the overall NCDs agenda (WHO, 2017b). For example, with countries experimenting with how they can reduce exposure to NCDs risk factors as well as mobilize more resources for NCDs prevention and control, most Member countries have made efforts to increase and simplify taxation of tobacco products. The drive for change is set to continue.

All countries have established national NCDs targets for 2025, which will help them gauge progress ahead of the 2030 SDGs deadline. The Colombo Declaration, endorsed at the Regional Committee in 2016, calls upon countries to explore innovative financing methods, including dedicated taxation of health-damaging commodities such as tobacco, alcohol and unhealthy foods and beverages.

Dili Declaration on Tobacco Control 2015, ratified by the Health Ministers of Member States of the WHO SEA Region participating in the Sixty-eighth Session of the Regional Committee in Timor-Leste, has been the guiding principle for effective tobacco control across the Region. It calls for further strengthening of the coherent, comprehensive and integrated approach in tobacco control, including achievement of regional voluntary targets on NCDs prevention and control and facilitating a multisectoral and multidisciplinary approach for tobacco control. The declaration encourages countries in the Region to consider measures, as appropriate, within and beyond WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control guidelines in the interest of protecting public health from the harms of tobacco use. To tackle with the growing menace of novel and emerging tobacco and nicotine products, the declaration calls upon the Member countries to develop and adopt appropriate policies and new regulations on electronic nicotine delivery systems (ENDS) (WHO, 2015).

Reversing rising rates of NCDs is, ultimately, a long-term pursuit. But the foundations for success are already being laid in the SEA Region. Effective tobacco control is an integral part of this foundation but needs to be sustained and accelerated, and innovative ways ought to be explored for addressing demand as well as supply side issues in respect of the ongoing tobacco epidemic. We remain committed to effectively navigate countries of the Region in this crusade.

Author Contribution Statement

None.

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