

The Vicious circle of tobacco and poverty

The World Health Organization (WHO) launches this year's campaign for World No Tobacco Day with the slogan: Tobacco and Poverty: a vicious circle, stressing the enormous economic costs of tobacco use and cultivation to families, communities and countries.

The slogan 'a vicious circle' explains the inextricable link that exists between tobacco and poverty, and how the use of tobacco, especially by poorer people who consume this product the most, can cause harmful consequences to their already precarious economies and income.

"There has been a tremendous progress on tobacco control thanks to the efforts made by many governments and civil society," said Dr LEE Jong-wook, Director-General of WHO. "But the efforts must continue: every 6.5 seconds one person dies and many others fall ill or suffer diseases and disability due to tobacco use. The world cannot accept such easily preventable human and economic losses."

Studies across all the regions in the world show that it is the poorest people who tend to smoke the most in both developing and developed countries, and who bear most of the disease burden.

People with less education also tend to consume more tobacco. A recent study in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, concludes that smoking prevalence among people with four or less years of studies is 26%, compared with a 17% for those with 9 or more years of schooling. The trend is similar for income levels.

Many studies also show that poorer people spend a higher percentage of their household income on tobacco products, to the detriment of other basic needs such as food, healthcare or education.

In Bangladesh, for example, 10.5 million people currently malnourished would have an adequate diet if two-thirds of the money spent on tobacco in the country was spent on food instead. Tobacco can also have an adverse impact on countries' economies. The major study that tried to measure the economic costs of tobacco at a global level was made by Barnum in 1994, and estimated that it results in an annual global net loss of US\$ 200 thousand million, a third of this loss being in developing countries.

The World Bank estimates that high-income countries spend currently between 6% and 15% of their total health-care costs to treat tobacco-related diseases.

Some specific data are also available for developing countries. In Egypt annual costs of treating diseases caused by tobacco use have been estimated at US\$ 545.5 million in a 2003 report and in China health costs of smoking were estimated at US\$ 6.5 billion per year (in the mid-1990s).

Other costs to the economies include loss of foreign exchange (as the majority of countries are net importers of tobacco), loss of tax revenue due to smuggling and damages to the environment caused by tobacco cultivation.

WHO also highlights in this year's campaign that an overwhelming majority of small tobacco farmers, especially in developing countries, live in poverty. "A big part of the health and economic costs related to tobacco are endured by small farmers and their families that grow the tobacco crop. Precarious labour conditions, including the use of child labour and exposure to highly toxic products, and a highly negative impact on the environment make tobacco an issue inextricably linked to poverty and other development issues," said Dr Catherine le Galès-Camus, Assistant Director-General, Noncommunicable Diseases and Mental Health, WHO.

Approaching the end of the signature period of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control

(WHO FCTC) --open only until 29 June 2004-- , this year's World No Tobacco Day campaign is also geared to demystify the economic benefits of tobacco by offering at the same time a solution to those countries that depend more heavily on this product. The WHO FCTC, adopted unanimously by all WHO Member States in May last year, sets out the provisions and minimum standards that State Parties to the Treaty will have to respect in their tobacco control programmes.

"We are very optimistic about the progress on the number of signatures and ratifications of the WHO FCTC," said Dr Vera Luiza da Costa e Silva, Director, Tobacco Free Initiative at WHO, referring to the current 118 signatures (including the EC) and 16 ratifications of the Treaty. "It shows the confidence governments of the world have in the Convention, and their commitment to deal with what has become a worldwide health and economic threat."

Today, WHO notes that the tobacco epidemic is still expanding, especially in developing countries where, currently, 84% of the smokers live. Tobacco use kills 4.9 million people each year, and this toll it is expected to double in the next 20 years. At current rates, the total number of tobacco users is expected to rise to 1.7 billion by 2025 from 1.3 billion now.

To celebrate World No Tobacco Day, the Ministry of Health of Brazil and WHO are launching a two-day celebratory event in Brasilia, Brazil, while thousands of other activities and celebrations are taking place around the world.