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Welcome note

Illicit tobacco trade and taxation in the Eastern Mediterranean

Beirut, 8-9 November 2018

Dr Iman Shankiti, WHO representative in Lebanon, Mr Fadi Snan, FCTC focal point of the Ministry of Health of Lebanon, Mr Francis Thompson, executive director of the Framework Convention Alliance, an observer to the Conference of the Parties, government representatives, civil society colleagues, representatives of the WHO FCTC Secretariat's Knowledge Hubs, dear organizers, colleagues.

On behalf of the Secretariat of the WHO FCTC, I would like to welcome you all to this meeting which is taking place less than one month after the governing body of the Protocol to Eliminate Illicit Trade in Tobacco Products met for the first time. The first session of the Meeting of the Parties took place, in Geneva, Switzerland, the seat of the secretariat of the FCTC that also serves as the secretariat of the Protocol.

During this meeting we will have the opportunity to review not only the requirements and the status of the Protocol, but also the outcomes of the first Meeting of the Parties.

Speaking at the Meeting of the Parties, Carlos Cisneros, MOP1 President and Ecuador's Undersecretary of Health Promotion, acknowledges that the "*... meeting was a historic occasion and a critical turning point for tobacco control and public health. The illicit tobacco trade jeopardizes both public health and tobacco control efforts. We must act together to fight the illicit tobacco trade with a common framework.*"

The Protocol to Eliminate Illicit Trade in Tobacco Products, developed and adopted by the FCTC Parties, entered into force on 25 September 2018. It currently has 48 Parties, out of which 44 Parties have participated in the Meeting of the Parties. An additional 56 State non-Parties, along with representatives from civil society and intergovernmental organizations, attended the meeting as observers. Delegations addressed key technical and operational procedures for

implementing the Protocol, which aims to strengthen tobacco control efforts under the WHO Framework Convention for Tobacco Control (FCTC).

Delegates at MOP1 reached an agreement to create a working group to produce a comprehensive report to showcase good practices and experiences of State Parties in the implementation of tracking and tracing systems, and to prepare the conceptual work in view of creating a global information-sharing focal point to combat illicit tobacco trade. Establishing tracking and tracing systems will allow Parties to have a tighter control on the trade of tobacco products and ensure that tobacco taxes are applied as intended and could result in their intended impact on reducing tobacco use.

The Protocol provides a comprehensive set of tools to fight illicit trade, including establishment of a global monitoring system to track and trace the movement of tobacco products and updates on their legal status. The Protocol also includes measures to promote international cooperation, including sanctions and law enforcement. These will be presented in more details later during this meeting.

To date, 48 FCTC Parties have joined the Protocol, but let's not forget that all Parties to the FCTC have an obligation to implement measures to combat illicit trade in accordance with Article 15 of the Convention. In 2018, two-thirds of the Parties to the WHO FCTC have reported that they enacted or strengthened national legislation aimed at tackling illicit trade in tobacco products. This shows the need for further and strengthened action in combatting illicit tobacco trade.

This meeting aims to provide a good opportunity to exchange information and knowledge on how to better address tobacco illicit trade, and relatedly, tobacco taxation.

Talking about tobacco taxation, it is worth reminding ourselves that compared to other WHO regions, the Eastern Mediterranean Region has the second lowest average tobacco prices and the third lowest average excise tax per pack. Also, many non-cigarette forms of tobacco are often only minimally taxed or are not covered by tobacco taxation at all. Comprehensive taxation strategies should be considered across all products to prevent a further increase in tobacco consumption or switching between various forms of tobacco use.

Let us also not forget that we need to be vigilant about the tobacco industry and other interest groups' efforts to interfere with the implementation of the FCTC and the Protocol. Preventing interference from these groups within our work is becoming more important than ever as we are addressing here two measures that are so much interlinked. We should also ensure that while discussing taxation and illicit trade matters we also appropriately consider how such policies are applied to waterpipe tobacco products. It is extremely important that we do not lose sight of the peculiarities of waterpipe tobacco, as its trade and consumption is so relevant to this region.

And finally, promoting regional and international collaboration in tax policy-making and curbing illegal trade in tobacco products is absolutely vital as it is a global issue, which has no border.

I wish you all a very productive meeting and fruitful discussions.