



## WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control

The past twenty years has witnessed the passage of a number of historic international agreements, including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Landmine Treaty. Now, the international community is taking action on the number one cause of preventable death in the world today – tobacco. This effort will move into high gear in October 2000, when negotiators from all of the countries belonging to the World Health Organization (WHO) will meet in Geneva, Switzerland to begin hammering out a global treaty on tobacco control. The Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), as this treaty will be called, represents a historic effort by the international community to promote a coordinated international response to one of the most deadly epidemics of our time.

- Tobacco is truly a global problem. WHO estimates that each year about 4 million people die from tobacco-related illness. If current trends continue, this figure will rise to about 10 million per year by the year 2030, with 70% of those deaths occurring in developing countries. In fact, more people are expected to die from tobacco-related illness over the next 30 years than from AIDS, automobile accidents, maternal mortality, homicide and suicide combined.<sup>1</sup>

Just as infectious diseases know no political boundaries, leaving individual countries incapable of effectively containing them, the tobacco epidemic also requires international cooperation if it is to be controlled. The challenges that transcend the borders of sovereign states include:

- Advances in communications technology which facilitate aggressive global marketing and promotion of tobacco products, such as over the Internet and/or on satellite television.
- Cigarette smuggling across national borders.
- The increased liberalization of global trade and investment rules, which has allowed tobacco companies to expand their operations around the world.

### Background

The effort to negotiate a global tobacco control treaty formally began in May 1999, when all 191 member states of WHO endorsed the start of negotiations for the FCTC at the annual World Health Assembly. A record 50 nations took the floor to pledge financial and political support for the Convention, including the five permanent members of the United Nations' Security Council, as well as major tobacco growing and exporting countries.

Negotiations on the FCTC will officially commence on October 16th, 2000 in Geneva, Switzerland. A document containing draft elements of a Convention, the product of two previous inter-governmental meetings, will serve as a basis for the negotiations.

### Possible Issues to Be Negotiated

The draft document that has been prepared for consideration by the negotiators contains a wide range of issues, including: advertising, promotion and sponsorship of tobacco products; smuggling of tobacco products; cessation and treatment; tobacco price and tax policies; passive smoking; sale of duty-free tobacco products; tobacco product regulation, including testing and reporting of ingredients and constituents and the ability to require tobacco product modification; information exchange; health education and research; and agricultural policies.

### Why a Framework Convention is Important

The FCTC will be the world's first tobacco control treaty and has the potential to have an historic impact on global public health. The negotiation and implementation of the FCTC could make an enormous contribution to stemming the growth of

the tobacco epidemic by fostering multilateral cooperation on aspects of tobacco control that transcend national boundaries, such as the global marketing of tobacco products and smuggling. The Convention process will also raise national and international awareness, as well as technical and financial resources, for effective national tobacco control measures.

In addition to the specific benefits of the Convention and related protocols, the process leading to the passage of the FCTC is likely to:

- Greatly raise the profile of tobacco issues in the media and legislatures around the world.
- Give new impetus to efforts to strengthen national legislation and action to control the harm caused by tobacco.
- Help mobilize national and global technical and financial support for tobacco control.
- Bring new ministries, including those dealing with foreign affairs and finance, more deeply into the tobacco control effort.
- Provide tobacco control organizations with critical opportunities to build alliances both nationally and internationally; educate policy-makers; and, raise public awareness of the health hazards of tobacco and the activities of the tobacco industry.

### Tobacco Industry Resistance to the Framework Convention

Predictably, the FCTC has already come under attack by the tobacco industry, even though the actual content has yet to be negotiated. During the months leading up to the preparatory meetings for the FCTC in Geneva, tobacco industry representatives and industry front groups fanned out across the developing world, holding meetings with legislators and the press in an attempt to derail the process. Ignoring the fact that the FCTC will be the product of negotiations among sovereign states, the industry is charging that the FCTC will usurp the ability of governments to determine national tobacco control policies. It continues to try to scare governments into believing that the FCTC will be economically ruinous, despite the findings of the recent World Bank report.<sup>2</sup> And, even though it has been invited by WHO to present its views at a public hearing in October 2000, the industry continues to complain that it has somehow been shut out of the process.

### Strong NGO Presence Needed

Given the tobacco industry's long history of subverting public health initiatives for its own short-term gain, it will be vital for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to have a strong presence at the negotiations so that public health is protected rather than tobacco industry

profits. More importantly, it will be essential for national NGOs to educate and lobby their government representatives to the FCTC before and during the negotiations so that the industry's attempts to obfuscate the issues and hinder the process are not successful. A Framework Convention Alliance has been formed by NGOs from around the world to support the development of a strong FCTC and combat tobacco industry disinformation.

### Resources on the World Wide Web

WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control  
<http://tobacco.who.int/en/fctc/index.html>

Framework Convention Alliance (coalition of NGOs working for a strong Convention)  
<http://www.fctc.org/0004intro.shtml>

Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids' Resource Page on the FCTC  
<http://tobaccofreekids.org/campaign/global/framework/>

<sup>1</sup>World Health Organization, *World Health Report 1999*; <http://www.who.int/whr/>; Howard Barnum, "The Economic Burden of the Global Trade in Tobacco," Paper presented at the 9th World Conference on Tobacco and Health, October 1994.

<sup>2</sup>World Bank, *Curbing the Epidemic: Governments and the Economics of Tobacco Control*, 1999; <http://www1.worldbank.org/tobacco/reports.htm>.