



OPENING OF FCTC 2030 ANNUAL MEETING

BUDVA, 4-6 SEPTEMBER 2023

Remarks from Head of WHO Country Office Montenegro

His Excellency, Mr Dragoslav Šćekić, Minister of Health of Montenegro,

Dr Blanco, Head of the Convention Secretariat

Representatives from FCTC 2030 project countries and donors,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Good morning and welcome to Montenegro.

I am very pleased to be the representative of the World Health Organization at this meeting, and as the Head of the Country Office, to wish you a very warm welcome to Montenegro.

The WHO is a very willing delivery partner for the FCTC 2030 project, as well as strongly supporting tobacco control action by Member States.

It is a great honor for Montenegro to be hosting this important international meeting about the implementation of the FCTC 2030 project. In recent years, Montenegro has made many advances in tobacco control, but the use of tobacco remains a major public health concern in this country. I am sure this is the situation for most of the countries represented here.

We have heard from Dr Adriana about how tobacco is such a serious and multidimensional problem.

Just looking at the problem from the health perspective shows why the tobacco epidemic needs to be solved. Tobacco is a leading risk factor for non-communicable diseases such as cardiovascular disease, cancer, lung disease and diabetes. More than three-quarters of all deaths from non-communicable diseases are in low- and middle-income countries, like ours.

Also, probably less recognized, is that tobacco is also a risk factor for communicable diseases as well, such as tuberculosis. Smoking reduces the effectiveness of treatment for HIV. And evidence is clear that smoking increased the risk of severe complications in people with COVID.

COVID has shown so clearly that we must build resilient populations to withstand future health emergencies. Ending the use of tobacco is a vital if we are to create healthier communities in the future.

We need to remember tobacco death and diseases are entirely preventable, if only people did not use tobacco. Tobacco-related diseases place enormous burdens on already stretched health systems, and unless the measures in the FCTC are implemented fully, the burdens will surely only get worse.

The situation in Montenegro tells the story. In this country, some 35% of adults are smokers. Some 2000 people in this country die every year from tobacco-related diseases, accounting for 30% of all deaths in the country. This figure is enormous. Given that half of all smokers will die from a tobacco-related disease, we need to do more to raise public awareness of just how harmful tobacco use can be.

When implementing to supply and demand reduction measures in the FCTC, let us remain mindful that we have a corresponding duty to support tobacco users to quit. Quitting tobacco use can be difficult, but there are evidence-based treatments that can be offered, including behavioral support together with the stop smoking medicines that are included in the WHO's Model List of Essential Medicines.

While we cannot diminish how devastating tobacco can be for users and their families, it is also important to consider the wider economic impacts.

We are very grateful to the FCTC 2030 for the Tobacco Control Investment Case that has been prepared for Montenegro. This has laid bare the economic reality of tobacco use. Tobacco causes vast economic costs in this country, representing over 7% of GDP. These facts must not be hidden from public view. Tobacco companies often claim to be making economic contributions, but this is not the case. Their products are causing misery and suffering, ruining lives and families.

Please let me also reflect on, what I believe, to be our biggest challenge. To stop children from taking up tobacco use in the first place and subjecting themselves to a life-long addiction in adulthood. In Montenegro, some 9% of young people aged 13-15 years of age smoke tobacco.

Tobacco companies do their utmost to promote their deadly products and to interfere with our tobacco control efforts. That must be stopped.

Let me raise the issue of novel tobacco products and e-cigarettes. These products must be fully regulated and kept out of the hands of children. I am pleased to see that this is a topic that will be covered in this workshop, and I look forward to hearing more about the options we have for action.

Finally, I wish to remark on the environmental impacts of tobacco. The environment is harmed through growing, manufacturing and the use of tobacco products. For example, we see cigarette butts everywhere, including on our beautiful beaches. These are made of plastic and do not readily decompose. Tobacco's impact on the environment, including climate change, is yet another topic that needs public attention.

The FCTC promotes international cooperation between Parties to advance tobacco control. I am confident that we see good cooperation during this meeting. Often tobacco issues need to be addressed on a regional level. Within the Balkans Region, we taking the initiative to look at how issues such as stronger tobacco tax, stopping illicit trade in tobacco and stopping tobacco industry interference can be achieved by governments working together.

Please let me send thanks to Dr Adriana's team at the Convention Secretariat for the FCTC 2030 project. The technical assistance, financial resources and political engagement that comes from this innovative project is instrumental in creating the momentum we need at country-level to make progress on tobacco control.

WHO Country Offices have an important role in helping to deliver the project. We stand ready to continue to support the full implementation of the FCTC.

Given how important the FCTC 2030 project is, I am committed to participate in this annual meeting for the full three days.

I look forward to meeting everyone and wish you the very best for the meeting.

Thank you.

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