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newSpecial's exclusive interview

# WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control

*newSpecial had the opportunity to interview Dr. Adriana Blanco Marquizo, the Head of the Secretariat of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (Convention Secretariat), and learn more about its work and impact on global health.*

**GARRY ASLANYAN, WHO**  
**You were appointed Head of Secretariat of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC) in Geneva in March 2020. Before that, you had an impressive career both in the WHO Regional Office of the Americas and in your home country Uruguay. Tell us about yourself before taking up this important role in Geneva?**

I am a medical doctor, born and raised in Uruguay and I have a Master's degree in policies to prevent addictions in children and adolescents. To be a doctor has been my dream for as long as I can remember, and I am

lucky to have worked in clinical settings for almost two decades.

I started my journey in tobacco control more than 20 years ago, in Uruguay, splitting my activity between clinical work and public health. At that time, the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control was being discussed.

Back then, I worked for the Health Department of the Municipality of Montevideo, the government of the capital city of Uruguay, and soon I began to represent it at tobacco control activities towards the ratification of the Treaty and after that in the enactment of the first measures: smoke-free environments and health warnings. I also worked on tobacco cessation coordinating the clinics of the Municipality.

In 2006, I took the difficult decision of leaving my country to go to the Pan American Health Organization in Washington DC, to keep on working on

tobacco control, but at the regional level.

**Could you share with the readers of newSpecial magazine a little bit more about the work of the Convention Secretariat in Geneva and how does it interact with the rest of the UN family (for example we know that the Convention Secretariat is part of the UN Interagency Task Force on NCDs (UNIATF))?**

The Convention Secretariat, serves two treaties: the WHO FCTC and the Protocol to Eliminate Illicit Trade in Tobacco Products (the Protocol). We are currently hosted by the World Health Organization, here in Geneva.

The WHO FCTC was negotiated under the auspices of the WHO, adopted in 2003 at the World Health Assembly and entered into force in February 2005, and the Protocol was adopted by the Fifth session of the Conference of the Parties (COP) in 2014 and entered into force in September 2018.



The work of the Convention Secretariat includes:

- supporting our governing bodies: the COP for the WHO FCTC, and the Meeting of the Parties (MOP) for the Protocol, as well as any subsidiary bodies;
- supporting countries to implement the Global Strategy to Accelerate Tobacco Control: advancing Sustainable Development through the Implementation of the WHO FCTC 2019-2025 adopted by COP 8;
- providing technical cooperation in other areas requested by Parties; and
- coordinating with WHO, and other United Nations agencies.

Regarding the United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on the Prevention and Control of Non-communicable diseases (UNIATF), we, as part of the United Nations system, are independent members of it. Taking into account the importance of the full implementation of the WHO FCTC to achieve the non-communicable disease-related targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, a thematic group on tobacco control was established and the Convention Secretariat currently chairs the group.

In that group, the Convention Secretariat has led the development and promotion of a

Model Policy on preventing tobacco industry interference among United Nations agencies; endorsed by the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) meetings in 2017 and 2018. Also, we promoted a smoke-free United Nations campus, joining forces with WHO, to develop a toolkit on how to make United Nations campuses smoke-free; and we are also working with several United Nations agencies to develop a new joint programme to support low- and middle-income countries in developing economically sustainable alternative livelihoods to tobacco growing.

**When you assumed your position, what key priorities did you set for yourself and the Secretariat?**

Firstly, I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the work of my predecessors – Dr Haik Nikogosian, and Dr Vera Luiza da Costa e Silva, for the tremendous work they both did in building this solid foundation on which I now find myself standing.

The WHO FCTC turned 15 this year on 27 February (yes, an adolescent!) and even though there is much we can be proud of in terms of achievements made by the Parties, the reality shows that progress is still uneven across the world.

The implementation of the Global Strategy that I mentioned before is my first priority. The Strategy has three pillars, the first one looks to strengthen the implementation of some articles of the Convention, targeting those places where we can be more effective. The second pillar focuses on raising the profile and visibility of the Convention as a response to the threat that tobacco represents to economic and social development and to the environment and to build partnerships with a wide range of sectors fostering policy coherence across them, internationally and nationally. Finally, the third pillar looks to overcome barriers to the full, effective and sustainable implementation of the WHO FCTC and to protect it from the interference of the tobacco industry.

Another priority for me is raising awareness and attracting more Parties to the Protocol. Illicit trade poses a serious threat to public health because it increases access to – often cheaper – tobacco products, thus fueling the tobacco epidemic and undermining tobacco control policies. It also causes substantial losses in government revenues, and at the same time contributes to the funding of international criminal activities.

**We have often heard that tobacco is not just a health issue but a development issue. What are your views on this and how does the mandate of the WHO FCTC intersect, in concrete terms, with the Sustainable Development Goals?**

After being totally absent from the Millennium Development Goals, now non-communicable diseases and their risk factors have been included in the Development Agenda, and specifically there is now one SDG target on tobacco control: Target 3.a, positioning

the implementation of the WHO FCTC as key to the achievement of SDG 3.4. in recognition of the tremendous health toll of tobacco use. The evidence is staggering: without adequate investment in tobacco control it is estimated that up to 1 billion people could die from tobacco-related disease during this century. The Convention Secretariat and WHO are co-custodians for the implementation of this target.

But we also need to remember the social, economic, and environmental consequences of tobacco use and production on individuals, families, communities and countries. Tobacco use costs the global economy over a trillion USD annually, due to medical expenses and lost productivity; and the environmental impact, due to deforestation and soil degradation from tobacco growing as well as water and soil pollution from pesticide use and cigarette littering, are of growing concern.

Recognizing the global commitment of the 2030 Agenda to ‘leave no one behind’, the contribution of tobacco to inequities, both within and between countries, is particularly troubling. Within countries, the poorest and most marginalized are more likely to consume tobacco and at younger ages, and to be exposed to second-hand smoke. Between countries, tobacco use is rising rapidly in many low- and middle-income countries, where the tobacco measures are still weaker than in many developed countries.

According to a UNDP and Convention Secretariat’s jointly published report, the WHO FCTC is an accelerator for sustainable development and it interacts with all 17 of the SDG goals on the 2030 Agenda. Therefore, inclusion of the WHO FCTC within the

2030 Agenda is a potential game-changer.

**Many of our readers would like to know more about current recommendations on novel and emerging nicotine and tobacco products, a growing concern worldwide.**

This is an area that is very worrying, especially because of the systematic, aggressive and sustained marketing tactics employed to attract a new generation of tobacco users, through the introduction of flavours and other attractive features.

The Conference of the Parties has reviewed this theme on many occasions and has adopted decisions in the last three COPs. The COP8 has recommended to countries “to regulate, including restrict, or prohibit, as appropriate, the manufacture, importation, distribution, presentation, sale and use of novel and emerging

tobacco products, as appropriate to their national laws, considering a high level of protection for human health”.

Also, it recommends preventing the initiation; preventing health claims about these products; including them in the smoke-free regulations and ban on advertisement, promotion and sponsorship; and protecting tobacco-control policies and activities from all commercial and other vested interests related to novel and emerging tobacco products, including interests of

the tobacco industry, in accordance with Article 5.3 of the WHO FCTC.

**What has been the impact on the work of the Secretariat and on global tobacco control in general of this unprecedented period during which all the focus and resources have shifted to battling the COVID-19 pandemic?**

To say that this year has been extraordinary, in every sense of the word, is no understatement. First, let me say that like the rest of the world, we are deeply saddened by the lives lost to this pandemic, and the heavy toll that essential workers are bearing for the good of the rest of us.

The Secretariat staff is teleworking, and many events have been cancelled and others held virtually. We have offered our Parties the reassurance that once the pandemic begins to be better contained and countries begin to take on other commitments again, we will be ready to assist them to continue strengthening tobacco control activities.

The Bureaus elected by the eighth session of the COP to the WHO FCTC and the first session of the MOP to the Protocol, during a virtual

meeting in April, made a joint decision to postpone the COP and MOP sessions scheduled for November 2020. Hence, COP9 and MOP2 will now take place in November 2021, in The Hague.

Unfortunately, even during the pandemic, the daily toll of the tobacco-related deaths continues and will claim the more than 8 million lives that it takes each year. That is why once the worst part of the pandemic passes, we will be urging our Parties to resume their work on tobacco control.

Lastly, I am particularly grateful for the tremendous leadership shown by our hosting agency – the World Health Organization – during these extraordinary and challenging times, in its efforts to stop the global COVID-19 pandemic.■



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