Conference of the Parties to the 
WHO Framework Convention 
on Tobacco Control

Eight session 
Geneva, Switzerland, 1–6 October 2018

FCTC/COP/8/DIV/5 
01 October 2018

Keynote Speech by the Head of the WHO FCTC 
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Four years ago, I had my first COP as Head of the Convention Secretariat. Despite being a great challenge, totally different from anything I have ever lived before, it was for me a unique experience on so many levels, but at the same time ever so rewarding.

Looking back at the past four years, I am so proud of some of the achievements we have made. With a small team of around eighteen people, the Convention Secretariat has worked hard in increasing assistance to governments at all levels of development to implement the WHO FCTC. Under the exceptional guidance of the Bureau and Regional Coordinators and following COP decisions, we have boosted the network of observers to the COP and have worked hand-in-hand with them to coordinate responses to this epidemic including innovative approaches promoting intersectoral collaboration at country level.

Beyond the observers to COP, we have increased the number of Convention Secretariat’s Knowledge Hubs, supported by governments from our Parties, now accounting with seven centres of excellence providing relevant skills and building capacity in a wide range of areas.

We have also stimulated the establishment of Observatories to monitor the deceiving strategies of the tobacco industry in a number of countries with the aim to have a global platform containing real time information.

With a very small regular budget but counting on the reliability, resilience and high commitment from each of the Secretariat’s team member, together with partners, and the generous contribution of some Parties, we have given the Convention a new momentum by supporting and working towards:

1. The inclusion of “strengthening the implementation of the WHO FCTC in all Parties”, as one of the targets under Sustainable Development Goal 3, part of the blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all in the SDG2030 agenda.
2. The delisting by the UN Global Compact of the tobacco industry from their roster of private sector socially responsible companies bringing the tobacco industry to the level of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons.
3. The promotion of ECOSOC’s recommendation to all UN agencies to adopt a model policy to not accept funds from the tobacco industry.
4. The successful entering into force of the Protocol to Eliminate Illicit Trade in Tobacco Products, a second treaty in its own right.

Additionally, plain packaging became an important end game tool with a true domino effect despite the efforts of the tobacco industry to block new laws. It was reassuring to learn that WTO Panel made no findings that tobacco plain packaging measures are inconsistent with the TRIPS agreement, the TBT Agreement, and GATT in the case put forward against Australia by a number of WTO member states.

Thanks to the government of the UK, joined later by Australia, the Convention Secretariat has engaged on a very important and unique development assistance project, the FCTC2030 which is already reaching positive outcomes in 15 countries. We were also very fortunate to receive extra budgetary contributions from Norway, Panama, EU, Canada and Netherlands in the last biennium and by thanking them we also invite other Parties to join them in their ODAs contribution to strengthen the implementation of the Convention.

Even though many governments have advanced tobacco control actions and clearly progressed on implementing the Convention, this is not a time to be complacent as great challenges are still lying ahead, Parties moving at disparate paces and the future remains uncertain. Many Parties, too many Parties, are still to implement the overdue time-bound requirements of Article 8, 11 and 13.
This might be the right time for Parties to assess their commitments, engagements and actions. They should ask themselves whether they are satisfied with the progress they have made and whether they have fully utilized the “Power of the treaty” to reach optimum national tobacco control. Looking at the global progress so far, it is undeniable that there are still much more that Parties can do. For those that are further down the road of the Convention implementation, their knowledge should be transferred and their experience widely shared.

With astronomical budgets, the tobacco industry continues their furious efforts to undermine the implementation of our treaty. New front groups and entities have been created overnight in the four corners of the world and pretend to propose alternative livelihoods to tobacco growing, eradicate child labour, promote respect for human rights, control illicit trade and protect smokers and non-smokers from the harmful effect of second-hand smoke.

New emerging products are flooding our streets and our shops, and their aggressive marketing techniques have taken many governments by surprise, cleverly using loopholes in existing legislations. Parties should expedite implementation of article 5.3 Guidelines and ensure that its applicable to all commercial and vested interests of the tobacco industry, including addressing unproven claims of harm reduction.

Despite the ECOSOC resolution, some UN agencies are still being persuaded by the tobacco industry to directly or indirectly partner and use their funds. Besides supporting projects with no real impact, these funds show clear conflict of interest and are in absolute violation of the spirit of WHO FCTC and article 5.3. We hope that policy coherence is the guiding principle for the UN adherence to ECOSOC resolution.

Some governments are still to be persuaded that nominating their delegations to attend COPs is by itself an important tool to protect our treaty from vested interests of the tobacco industry. A COP delegation should prioritise the essence of the treaty above all. In that sense, it has become urgent and utterly vital to maximise transparency from whoever is around the table to steer the work of the treaty, its guidelines and Protocols. This is also true for the Convention Secretariat whose staff must be above any real or perceived conflict of interest.

Today, we are all here for COP8, and with many important topics to be discussed, it promises to be a very productive one.

The Mid-term strategic framework including the proposed implementation review mechanism provides an excellent opportunity to guide and support global tobacco control actions. We call WHO, COP observers and global partners to use it, if adopted, as a roadmap to coordinate future action. Cross-border advertising is a continuous threat to effective population level approaches especially when the world is increasingly digital. We have still a lot to do in implementing article 17 & 18 and to promote gender and indigenous population-sensitive approaches.

As you are all well aware, this year we will be celebrating the First Meeting of the Parties to the Protocol to Eliminate Illicit Trade in Tobacco Products. For this first MOP, 46 Parties to the Protocol will gather to start putting together the Protocol’s architecture and give the Convention Secretariat its first mandate. We encourage Parties to the treaty to join the Protocol.
While we are proud of the progress made, it is critical to consider funding mechanisms as a high priority, especially to drive forward the two treaties. We wish the Parties will agree to guarantee the core work of the Governing Bodies of the treaty and the Convention Secretariat by adopting the proposed WP&B 2020/2021 with the adjustments it entails to address sharing costs between COP and MOP. We are also pleased that COP8 will consider a proposal for an innovative funding mechanism that without compromising the regular budget and existing extra budgetary contributions can ensure sustainability of the Convention Secretariat.

And last but definitively not least, please allow me to share with you some final thoughts from my four years’ experience as Head of the Secretariat:

First, strengthening the Convention Secretariat is absolutely key to provide Parties, but also the wider tobacco control community and the treaty, with the necessary support, tailored responses to new demands and above the adequate defence to the relentless attacks of the tobacco industry.

Second, the urgency in implementing supply reduction measures of the treaty takes us to new paths, away from the health sector. While keeping the treaty linked to the health sector, it is now time to ensure that we are acknowledged as a multi sectoral treaty secretariat to more legitimately engage with non-health sectors. In this regard, it is fundamental that Parties reinforce the mandate of the Convention Secretariat, as agreed at COP1, to represent within the UN and globally the operational arm of the Convention and now of the Protocol. The Convention Secretariat should be considered as an entity hosted by WHO but with semi independence on treaty and technical matters that should be only mandated by COP and MOP.

Finally, COP8 is themed this year around the protection of present and future generations. Tobacco control is pivotal to achieve the sustainable development goals. At this COP, distinguished delegates, you have the power to make the right decisions, to change the equation, to ensure that commercial, private profits are not above the interests of equity, development and sustainability. I wish us all success this week

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