18 March, 2015 | Abu Dhabi/Geneva: New data show a declining rate of tobacco use and an increase in numbers of non-smokers. But governments must intensify action to combat the tobacco industry and dramatically reduce consumption of tobacco products to, in turn, protect public health, according to the World Health Organization.

Non-smoking is becoming the new norm worldwide, according to a new online WHO Global Report on Trends in Tobacco Smoking, launched today during the 16th World Conference on Tobacco or Health (WCTOH) which opened yesterday in Abu Dhabi and ends on 21 March. The conference is focussing on tobacco control and noncommunicable diseases (NCDs), namely lung and heart diseases, cancers and diabetes.

The report finds that in 2010, there were 3.9 billion non-smokers aged 15 years and over in WHO Member States (or 78% of the 5.1 billion population aged 15+). This number is projected to rise to 5 billion (or 81% of the projected 6.1 billion population aged 15+) by 2025 if the current pace of tobacco cessation continues. This trend indicates countries are making inroads, but much greater action is needed to curb the tobacco epidemic if the global target to cut tobacco consumption by 30% by 2025 to reduce premature deaths from NCDs is to be met.

But as WHO highlights, obstacles remain.

“In an ominous trend, in some countries the battle between tobacco and health has moved into the courts,” says Dr Margaret Chan, WHO Director-General, who is attending the conference.

Dr Chan adds: “Governments wishing to protect their citizens through larger pictorial warnings on cigarette packs or by introducing plain packaging are being intimidated by industry’s threats of lengthy and costly litigation. This is an effort to deprive governments of their sovereign right to legislate in the public interest. We will push back hard.”

A new study on global trends and projections for tobacco use published in The Lancet ahead of the WCTOH found that the prevalence of men smoking tobacco products has fallen in 125 countries between 2000 and 2010, and in 156 countries for women. However, based on current trends, only 37 countries are on track to achieve the 30% tobacco reduction target set out in the Global Action Plan for the prevention and control of NCDs 2013-2020.

“The global movement against the tobacco epidemic is strong, and the downward trends in tobacco use are a testament to that fact,” says Dr Vera Luiza da Costa e Silva, Head of the WHO FCTC Secretariat. “We see many countries are taking steps to beat back the influence of the tobacco industry. But if we are to achieve targets set by governments to reduce tobacco consumption by 30% by 2025, intensified action will be needed to implement all the provisions of the WHO FCTC. This is a warning call to countries to step up the fight against the tobacco industry.”

WHO is co-sponsoring the conference in close collaboration with the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC) Secretariat. Key issues for discussion include:

- Global progress in implementation of the WHO FCTC, the first international treaty negotiated under WHO's auspices. Over the past ten years, the WHO FCTC has become one of the most widely and rapidly implemented treaties in United Nations history, now with 180 Parties and covering 90% of the world's population;
- Governments' progress to meet the global target of reducing tobacco consumption by 30% by 2025;
- The need for Parties to the FCTC to ratify the Protocol on the Illicit Trade of Tobacco Products and speed up its entry into force.
- The continued fight against the tobacco industry, including efforts to support national implementation of plain- or standard-packaging measures as part of the overall implementation of the WHO FCTC;
- Promoting core demand reduction measures of the WHO FCTC, including the implementation of the WHO MPOWER package, a set of WHO measures designed to help countries implement effective interventions to reduce demand.

Improving tobacco control is one of the keys to addressing NCDs. The latest WHO Global status report on NCDs states that 38 million lives were lost to NCDs in 2012, with nearly three quarters occurring in low- and middle-income countries, and 16 million (42%) being premature (people dying before the age of 70 years) - up from 14.6 million in 2000. Tobacco accounts for about one in 10 deaths, and up to half of current users will die from the effects of tobacco consumption: or 6 million deaths per year.

"Most of these premature deaths could have been prevented through action on tackling the four main risk factors – unhealthy diet, physical inactivity, harmful use of alcohol and tobacco use," says Dr Ala Alwan, Regional Director of WHO's Eastern Mediterranean office. "By curbing access to and controlling, with a view to ending, the addictive use of tobacco, countries will witness a dramatic reduction in premature deaths from NCDs."

WHO is working with countries worldwide to help them implement MPOWER measures to monitor tobacco use and prevention policies; protect people from tobacco smoke; offer help to quit tobacco use; warn about the dangers of tobacco; enforce bans on tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship; and raise taxes on tobacco.

http://www.who.int/mediacentre/news/releases/2015/trends-tobacco-use/en/

Related links:

- The World Conference on Tobacco or Health: http://www.wctoh.org/

- The WHO FCTC: http://www.who.int/fctc/en/

- WHO activities at the WCTOH: http://www.who.int/tobacco/worldconference2015/en/
- MPOWER: http://www.who.int/tobacco/mpower/en/