7 July, 2015 ¦ MANILA: Too few governments levy appropriate levels of tax on cigarettes and other tobacco products. They therefore miss out on a proven, low-cost measure to curb demand for tobacco, save lives and generate funds for stronger health services, according to the *World Health Organization's Report on the Global Tobacco Epidemic-2015.*

The report focusses on raising taxes on tobacco. Although 33 countries impose taxes that represent more than 75% of the retail price of a packet of cigarettes, many countries have extremely low tax rates. Some have no special tax on tobacco products at all.

"Raising taxes on tobacco products is one of the most effective – and cost-effective – ways to reduce consumption of products that kill, while also generating substantial revenue," says Dr Margaret Chan, WHO Director-General. "I encourage all governments to look at the evidence, not the industry's arguments, and adopt one of the best win-win policy options available for health".

Strategies to support the implementation of demand reduction measures contained within the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC), such as the "MPOWER" package, have helped save millions of lives in the past decade. MPOWER was established in 2008 to promote government action on six tobacco control strategies – one for each letter of the MPOWER acronym – to stamp out the tobacco epidemic, namely to:

- ***M***onitor tobacco use and prevention policies,
- ***P***rotect people from tobacco smoke,
- ***O***ffer help to quit tobacco use,
- ***W***arn people about the dangers of tobacco,
- ***E***nforce bans on tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship,
- ***R***aise taxes on tobacco.

The main findings of the report, funded by Bloomberg Philanthropies, include the fact that raising taxes is the least implemented MPOWER measure in terms of population coverage, and the one that has seen the least improvement in terms of government action since 2008. However, by 2014, 11 countries had raised taxes so that they represent more than 75% of the retail price of a packet of cigarettes, joining the 22 countries that had similarly high taxes in place in 2008.

Dr Douglas Bettcher, Director of WHO's Department for the Prevention of Noncommunicable diseases (NCDs), says higher tobacco taxes and prices are proven methods to reduce consumption and promote quitting the use of tobacco products.

"Evidence from countries such as China and France shows that higher tobacco product prices linked to increased taxes lead to declines in smoking prevalence and tobacco-related harm, such as lung cancer deaths," says Dr Bettcher.

Dr Vera da Costa e Silva, Head of the WHO FCTC Secretariat, notes that the Convention offers governments policies to curb illicit trade in tobacco products to reduce demand and boost tax revenues from tobacco sales. "Countries should consider implementing the provisions of the Protocol to eliminate Illicit Trade in Tobacco Products to confront the illegal market," she adds.

Tobacco taxation could also be a key source of funding for implementing the post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals.

Tobacco-related illness is one of the biggest public health threats the world has ever faced. Approximately one person dies from a tobacco-related disease every six seconds, equivalent to around six million people a year. That is forecast to rise to more than 8 million people a year by 2030 unless strong measures are taken to control the epidemic.

Tobacco use is also one of the four main risk factors behind the global epidemic of noncommunicable diseases, primarily cancers, cardiovascular and lung diseases, and diabetes. In 2012, these diseases killed 16 million people prematurely (before the age of 70 years), with more than 80% occurring in low- and middle-income countries.