The WHO South-East Asia Region is home to approximately one-fourth of the world’s population. A quarter of the world’s tobacco smokers and more than 80% of all users of smokeless tobacco live here. There are approximately 246 million smokers and 290 million smokeless tobacco users across South-East Asia.

This has a serious impact on health and well-being. Every year more than 1.3 million people in the Region die as a result of tobacco-related causes. Many more suffer tobacco-related illness and disease, including those who are exposed to second-hand smoke. If global trends continue, tobacco use will kill more than 8 million people annually by 2030. Of them, 83% will be from low- and middle-income countries.

As the theme of this year’s World No Tobacco Day outlines, the impact of tobacco use goes beyond public health, threatening development more broadly. Properly defined, development refers to a process that enhances social and economic well-being and sustains natural and human resources – a process undermined by the growth, manufacture, sale and consumption of tobacco. Not only does tobacco cause death, disease and lost productivity, for example, but it also drives biodiversity loss and the depletion of soil nutrients. To add to that, the tobacco industry is notorious for exploiting farmers and undermining labor laws, a practice too often ignored.

To avoid tobacco’s ills and accelerate sustainable development, countries across the Region should build on the substantial progress already made under the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC). Region-wide, the WHO FCTC’s evidence-based recommendations have inspired a range of game-changing interventions, from bans on tobacco advertising to graphic warnings that cover up to 90% of tobacco packages. This must continue, with a particular emphasis on developing viable alternatives to tobacco farming.

Global and local noncommunicable disease (NCD) monitoring frameworks are also crucial to change. Tobacco is the main risk factor for four major NCDs – cardiovascular disease, cancer, chronic lung diseases and diabetes. Following the adoption of the NCD Global Monitoring Framework at the World Health Assembly in 2013, WHO South-East Asia developed a region-specific monitoring framework. All Member States have now developed their own national frameworks, aiming for a 30% relative reduction in the prevalence of current tobacco use among persons aged 15 and above by the year 2025.
To achieve this target, as well as the Sustainable Development Goal of health and well-being for all, making full use of advocacy opportunities such as World No Tobacco Day is vital. World No Tobacco Day provides a chance to emphasize tobacco’s pernicious impact on health and development more broadly, and to do so among both policy-makers and the public. It is inspiring to hear of the activities being carried out in our Region, and to see that this opportunity is being embraced and made the most of.

I wish you an informative and engaging World No Tobacco Day, and reiterate WHO’s ongoing commitment to lifting tobacco’s deadly burden from across our Region. Through our collective efforts we can ensure region-wide development is sustainable, inclusive and as rapid as possible.

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