Tobacco control

What Ministries of Environment Need to Know

Tobacco control

Ministries of environment can take important first steps to advance tobacco control:

- Advance laws, policies, and regulations and other measures to combat the environmental harms of tobacco, for example, extended producer responsibility regulations that make tobacco producers accountable for post-consumption waste and elimination of single-use filters.
- Ensure the ministry’s participation in multisectoral planning and coordination for tobacco control, including the prevention of industry interference in policymaking.
- Strengthen independent data collection on the impacts of growing tobacco and raise awareness on the harms of the tobacco product ‘life cycle’.
- Require transparent and accurate information from the tobacco industry.
- Campaign for and support the elimination of tobacco farming subsidies and other investment incentives for the tobacco sector, exploring instead how to advance sustainable food systems and other sustainable alternatives.
- Campaign for and support economically viable alternatives for tobacco workers, growers, and as the case may be, individual sellers as called for by WHO FCTC Articles 17 and 18.

References

1. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Goal 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages. Available at: https://sdgindex.org/goal/3/
3. WHO FCTC. WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control Parties. Available at: https://fctc.who.int/fctc/article-17

Key Points

1. The entire 'life cycle' of tobacco products is wrought with environmental damage.
2. Tobacco threatens access to clean water and threatens the sustainability of oceans, seas and marine resources.
3. Tobacco control protects the environment and economy.
4. Ministries of environment can take important first steps to advance tobacco control and accelerate progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Sustainable Development Goal 3 (SDG 3) aims ‘to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.’ One of the means of achieving this goal is to strengthen implementation of the World Health Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC) in all countries, as appropriate (Target 3.a).

The WHO FCTC is a legally binding treaty that reaffirms the right to health. It was developed in response to the tobacco epidemic and currently has 183 Parties, covering more than 90 percent of the global population.
Tobacco is a major source of indoor air pollution. Secondhand smoke kills 1.2 million people each year. Children and women, including pregnant women, are the main victims of secondhand smoke, and suffer from the significant health consequences caused by tobacco smoke. 

Additionally, they often face difficulties in negotiating smoke-free spaces in line with their right to health. Those exposed to US$235 million (24% of the US$981 million spent) to clean up from governments and taxpayers to the tobacco industry. 

Tobacco farming causes up to 5 percent of deforestation in developing tobacco-growing countries. Consequently, approximately 200,000 hectares of land, equivalent to around half of the size of Cabo Verde, is cleared and 260,000 hectares of land, equivalent to around half of the size of Cabo Verde, is cleared for tobacco agriculture and curing yearly. Growing and curing tobacco also increases greenhouse and toxic gas emissions (e.g., carbon dioxide and methane) and contributes to global warming, land degradation and irreversible biodiversity loss.

Tobacco also depletes vast amounts of precious water. One cigarette requires about 3.7 liters of water over its life cycle. Each year, 22 billion tonnes of water are used for the global production of tobacco, approximately 3.5 times the water volume of Lake Chad or equivalent to around 15 million Olympic-sized swimming pools. Tobacco production requires more water than other crops — to eight times the water tomatoes and potatoes need. For every kilogram of tobacco not grown and consumed, the potable water needs of a human for a whole year could be realized instead.

Cigarette butts are the most littered waste item worldwide (4.5 trillion annually). Cigarette butts release microplastics, heavy metals and other chemicals when improperly discarded, polluting the world’s oceans and coasts and disturbing the ecosystem. The hazardous chemicals from cigarette butts can cause severe harm when ingested, threatening not only aquatic life and marine life, including marine and freshwater fish, birds, plants, reptiles and mammals, but also human health when these contaminated species enter the food chain.

Tobacco also depletes vast amounts of precious water. One cigarette requires about 3.7 liters of water over its life cycle. Each year, 22 billion tonnes of water are used for the global production of tobacco, approximately 3.5 times the water volume of Lake Chad or equivalent to around 15 million Olympic-sized swimming pools. Tobacco production requires more water than other crops — to eight times the water tomatoes and potatoes need. For every kilogram of tobacco not grown and consumed, the potable water needs of a human for a whole year could be realized instead. 

Tobacco control measures encourage countries and individual farmers to shift from tobacco production toward activities that are friendlier to people and planet; call on responsible use and disposal that does not harm others or the environment; protect people from the health impacts of secondhand smoke; and support tobacco users to quit and non-users to never start, reducing the overall environmental toll of tobacco. By implementing the WHO FCTC in full to address the overarching need to reduce tobacco use, countries will in turn lessen tobacco-related waste and tobacco-attributable environmental damage.

Tobacco control measures encourage countries and individual farmers to shift from tobacco production toward activities that are friendlier to people and planet; call on responsible use and disposal that does not harm others or the environment; protect people from the health impacts of secondhand smoke; and support tobacco users to quit and non-users to never start, reducing the overall environmental toll of tobacco. By implementing the WHO FCTC in full to address the overarching need to reduce tobacco use, countries will in turn lessen tobacco-related waste and tobacco-attributable environmental damage.