COVID-19 impact on tobacco control in Pacific island countries

More than one year on from the WHO’s declaration of COVID-19 as a global pandemic, the world continues to grapple with the vast and long-lasting consequences of the virus and the associated policy response. The Framework Convention Alliance (FCA) recently undertook some work to better understand the specific effects of the pandemic on tobacco control programs and progress around the world in order to inform future work and understand how best to support member organizations during this challenging time.

There is already preliminary data from a WHO rapid assessment survey that suggests that the public and political attention paid to the pandemic may, in some cases, have made it difficult for countries to maintain population-level preventive programs for NCD risk factors, including tobacco control.

FCA conducted a brief survey on how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected tobacco control around the world over the past year, including the work of civil society organizations that are members of the FCA as well as government tobacco control programs.

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COVID-19 impact... from page 1

Despite seven of the 14 Pacific island countries that are Parties to the FCTC having had zero cases of COVID-19 to date, these and the remaining seven who have had from as few as three to as many as 7,634 cases, have felt the negative effects of the pandemic similar to those experienced globally. There were seventeen respondents from the Western Pacific Region (WPR) and 62 respondents globally.

Survey results from the WPR show that 47% of respondents said their country had carried out some of its planned work in tobacco control while 41% said there had been very little progress on tobacco control work due to the impact of the pandemic (see Figure 1).

Some of the main obstacles or challenges to implementing national tobacco control programs and activities in the WPR during the pandemic can be seen in Figure 2. Results from Pacific respondents are similar to those in other regions of the world. Challenges to organizations’ programs in tobacco control (vs. national programs), followed a similar pattern.

One of the most commonly cited challenges noted by WPR respondents was that staff within the relevant ministry had been redeployed and “moved off” of the tobacco control file. Whether tobacco control had been discussed or included as part of the policy response to COVID-19 in their country, 47% of respondents said “yes”, 29% said “no” and 24% said they did not know or were unsure.

Though the results of the survey represent the opinions and perspectives of just a small fraction of all organizations and stakeholders working on tobacco control around the world, they do present some cause for concern.

We know that links between tobacco and increased risk of severe outcomes from COVID-19, including death, have made it even more urgent to preserve tobacco control programs during the pandemic and to make cessation services available to individuals who would like to quit.

We also know that setbacks in FCTC implementation, which is included in the SDGs as a means of implementation target for SDG 3 on health, could also have negative implications for progress on development and health equity.

Moving forward, it will be incumbent on the global tobacco control community to make sure that tobacco control stays on the agenda during and post-COVID-19 so that we can protect and boost progress towards a more equitable world.

In particular, we should think of ways in which we can emphasize the important contributions that tobacco control measures can make to ‘building back better’ from the pandemic. For example, tobacco taxes can help to both quickly mobilize funding to support COVID-19 response and recovery, while at the same time reducing tobacco use and the NCD burden to create healthier and more resilient populations.
Reducing the negative impact of tobacco is a major priority for Pacific Island Countries, as the region works to address a crisis of noncommunicable diseases (NCDs).

And while all Pacific countries have ratified the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC) and made strides to reduce tobacco consumption, they still face significant challenges to implementing tobacco control policies.

On 24-25 March 2021, the McCabe Centre for Law & Cancer hosted the Pacific Tobacco Control Workshop to support countries to meet their WHO FCTC obligations and reduce the burden of NCDs.

More than a dozen representatives from six Pacific countries attended the workshop, including government officials and members of civil society groups.

Workshop sessions were led by Daiana Buresova and Evita Ricafort – the McCabe Centre’s Regional Managers for the Pacific and Asia – as well as representatives from the Australian Government Department of Health, the WHO Pacific regional office, the WHO FCTC Secretariat and the Framework Convention Alliance (FCA).

As she welcomed participants to the workshop, Head of the WHO FCTC Secretariat Dr. Adriana Blanco Marquizo emphasised the devastating impact of NCDs – the leading cause of death in the Pacific region.

“We know that strengthening implementation of the WHO FCTC is a fundamental step in confronting that rising burden of cancer and other NCDs in the Pacific region,” Dr. Marquizo said.

Day 1 sessions focused on the WHO FCTC and its various articles, providing guidance on developing policies to implement them. Throughout the workshop, Pacific country representatives shared their experiences with tobacco control, including their successes and the challenges they faced.

Several countries noted that tobacco industry interference was a challenge, and Day 2 sessions focused largely on strategies to implement WHO FCTC Article 5.3 on industry interference.

Participants also described how COVID-19 has caused delays in tobacco control efforts, acknowledging that implementing the WHO FCTC is an essential part of recovering from the pandemic.

“Setbacks in FCTC implementation could have a detrimental impact on health equity and sustainable development in the long term,” said Ryan Forrest, Associate Director of Policy and Advocacy for the FCA.

See Challenges on page 4
Brief tobacco intervention workshop for youth provides more options for help to quit in the FSM

The Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) Tobacco Prevention & Control Program (TPCP) conducted its third Brief Tobacco Intervention (BTI) workshop in Pohnpei with the Youth 4 Change (Y4C) Organization in February, 2021. BTI is a tool that can be used to provide basic skills necessary to assist individuals on creating quit-plans to quit tobacco use.

Y4C is a youth focused organization in Pohnpei that promotes peer to peer approaches in youth wellness awareness and is especially known in the community for its artistic approaches in adapting education materials into song & dance, as well as other active engagements.

Y4C is also an implementing arm of the Pohnpei COVID-19 response and readiness team that conducts outreach activities in the community to convey prevention messages.

Y4C and the FSM TPCP connected to explore adding BTI into the services available at the Y4C Youth Center as well as mobile during the organization's outreach. The BTI workshop had attendants inclusive of both the counselors of Y4C as well as students ranging from high school to college. All 11 participants completed the workshop and will be able to conduct BTI in their respective settings.

For more information, contact Ari Skilling ASkilling2@fsmhealth.fm

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Wrapping up the two-day workshop, Daiana Buresova thanked Pacific representatives for participating and for sharing their experiences.

“We’ve learned a great deal from you,” Daiana said, offering the McCabe Centre’s support and encouraging Pacific countries to reach out for technical assistance.

The Pacific Tobacco Control Workshop was conducted as part of the McCabe Centre’s work as the WHO FCTC Knowledge Hub on Legal Challenges.

Primary funding for the workshop was provided by the Australian Government Department of Health, while additional funding for the McCabe Centre’s work is provided by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

For more information visit mccabecentre.org or email info@mccabecentre.org
Solomon Islands Wellness NCD Alliance is fighting one of the Islands most serious health challenges

Approximately 70% of deaths in Solomon Islands are due to non-communicable diseases (NCDs). The prevention and control of NCDs is a priority for this island nation that demands a whole-of-society response, with engagement from all relevant agencies and organisations.

In recognition of this health crisis, the Solomon Islands Wellness Non-Communicable Disease Alliance (WNCDA-SI) was established in June 2019. Made up of faith-based organisations, non-governmental organisations including women and youth and representatives from media organizations, its mission is to help the Ministry of Health & Medical Services (MHMS) coordinate multisectoral activities to address national NCD-related national issues.

Stakeholders met in the last quarter of 2020 to review progress and discuss their experiences since the creation of the Alliance. Dr. Geoffrey Kenilorea, the NCD Director for the Solomon Islands MHMS chaired and coordinated the 3-day workshop. He reflected that “the workshop highlighted that initiatives to broaden the base by involving non-state actors will be a momentous one in the history of advancing the NCD agenda in the Solomon Islands.

Workshop participant, Reverend George Fafale reiterated the importance of working together in the fight against NCDs. “We can beat NCDs through a conscious collaborative effort asserted by all.”

There was a sense of readiness and optimism seen by the group to roll out NCD related activities and an agenda through their respective networks in mutual partnership with the MHMS NCD department.

The Pacific Community’s (SPC) Public Health Division has been working closely with countries to provide technical advice and support to champion NCD prevention and control.

The SPC’s Team Leader for Non-Communicable Diseases Prevention and Control Programme, Dr. Si Thu Win Tin, said that a multisectoral approach is important when it comes to implementing national NCD strategic plans. “We encourage stakeholders to work together with health ministries so that set targets are achieved with the reduction of NCDs and a strengthening of policies and legislation will occur that will contribute towards a healthy and robust nation.”

See https://www.spc.int/updates/blog/2020/12/solomon-islands-wellness-ncd-alliance-is-fighting-one-of-the-islands-most
The WHO has launched a year-long global campaign for World No Tobacco Day 2021 - “Commit to Quit.” The WHO Quit Challenge on WhatsApp and publication “More than 100 reasons to quit tobacco” have been released.

“Commit to Quit” will help create healthier environments that are conducive to quitting tobacco by advocating for strong tobacco cessation policies; increasing access to cessation services; raising awareness of tobacco industry tactics, and empowering tobacco users to make successful quit attempts through “quit & win” initiatives. See here for announcement page.

WHO resources for quitting:
Florence https://www.who.int/news-room/spotlight/using-ai-to-quit-tobacco
WhatsApp Quit Challenge https://api.whatsapp.com/send/?phone=41798931892&text=tobacco&app_absent=0
Sign a pledge to quit here

The Global Center for Good Governance in Tobacco Control (GGTC), a partner of STOP (Expose Tobacco) - a global tobacco industry watchdog, has launched its second Global Media Competition. This year’s theme, “Lies & Cover-Ups: Time to Make Tobacco Pay” seeks creative visual designs (poster, infographics, short videos) that portray how the tobacco industry conceals, covers up, and misrepresents the enormous burdens it has placed on people, health systems, the environment and the global economy.

Calling all creators and artists to send the most compelling visual designs to show how the #tobaccoindustry uses deception to undermine health policies and escape liability. Submit your posters, short videos, and infographics on or before April 29, 2021 at http://bit.ly/2021GMC. You could win up to US$4,000!

#MakeTobaccoPay #TheGGTC #ExposeTobacco
Preventive Health Conference & Oceania Tobacco Control Conference (OTCC) 2021

Due to the evolving nature of the COVID-19 pandemic Cancer Council WA has partnered with the Public Health Association of Australia’s Preventive Health Conference 2021 for OTCC 2021. Being a part of this conference ensures that researchers and practitioners can still come together to discuss, share, and learn about the latest developments in tobacco control research and practice in 2021 before OTCC can be back to its usual format in 2023.

The Preventive Health Conference 2021, convened by the Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA), is an important annual conference on the public health calendar and will be held in Perth from Monday 10 to Wednesday 12 May 2021. The conference theme is: ‘Facing the new normal for prevention in 2021 and beyond’.

Resources

Tobacco Control Implementation Hub
The International Union Against Tuberculosis and Lung Disease or The Union, recently launched the Tobacco Control Implementation Hub. The Hub is a one-stop shop for resources on tobacco control policy implementation and enforcement.

Use the resource library to find best practice examples, implementation guides, case studies from high compliance settings, research tools, and more.

Vital Strategies COVID-19 Risk Communication Hub
During any crisis, people rely on accurate and timely communication to prevent misinformation and to provide guidance. The COVID-19 Risk Communication Hub offers scientifically accurate, adaptable messages to help people be prepared and stay informed.

It will be held as a "hybrid conference" that combines a "live" in-person event with a "virtual" online component. This hybrid conference will allow attendees to not only attend the tobacco control stream; it also allows those working in tobacco control to attend streams of content that cut across a variety of areas.


The WHO FCTC Secretariat’s Knowledge Hubs
The Convention Secretariat has established seven knowledge hubs (KHs). The hubs’ task is to analyze, synthesize and disseminate to the Parties to the Convention knowledge and information on matters under their expertise in relation to the Convention. The knowledge hubs are global in the scope of their work. To date, there are KHS on legal challenges, smokeless tobacco, water pipes, taxation, international cooperation, tobacco industry interference and WHO FCTC Articles 17 & 18. See here for details.

STOP- REACT Services
STOP is a global tobacco industry watchdog and has designed Rapid Engaged Action Team - REACT - services to help counter industry interference in tobacco control policy, especially for many low- and middle-income countries. REACT provides tobacco industry monitoring, research and expertise in strategic communication and countering industry arguments, customized to the national context. Grants are available to support these efforts. See here to learn more.
FCA PACIFIC ISLAND COUNTRIES

Working together to free the world from the devastating health, social, economic and environmental consequences of tobacco and tobacco use.

The Framework Convention Alliance (FCA) represents the voice of civil society in support of the world’s first global public health treaty – the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC). The FCA is made up of nearly 300 organizations from more than 100 low, middle and high income countries.

FCA has representatives in all WHO regions. The Western Pacific - Pacific Island Countries Regional Office (WPRO-Oceania) of FCA is located in Palau.

The Office’s main activities are:
- Mobilise and support civil society capacity in support of the FCTC
- Collaborate with other technical assistance providers serving the Pacific Islands
- Provide technical assistance to members & Parties

For further information, please contact the Regional Coordinator: lymana@fctc.org.

SAVE THE DATE

12 April 2021: Launch of the WHO Technical Manual on Tobacco Tax Policy and Administration


6-7 May, 2021: the virtual Leadership Summit on Tobacco Control, which was due to take place on the in May has been postponed. Watch the WCTOH website for updates on new dates for the Summit.


9-14 November, 2021: Ninth session of the Conference of the Parties (COP9), the Hague, Netherlands

16-18 November, 2021: Second session of the Meeting of the Parties (MOP2), the Hague, Netherlands.

FCA MEMBERS IN PACIFIC ISLAND COUNTRIES

- Coalition for a Tobacco Free Palau (CTFP)
- Fiji Cancer Society
- Global Youth Leadership Nexus (GYLN) (Solomon Islands)
- Kumit Bobrae Coalition Inc. (Marshall Islands)
- Marshall Islands Epidemiology and Prevention Initiatives, Inc. (MIEPI)
- Kia-Henry Nema (Papua New Guinea)
- Nauru National Women’s Council
- Samoa Cancer Society (SCS)
- Tuvalu Association of NGOs (TANGO)
- Ulkerreuil a Klengar– UAK (Palau)