

NOTE TO THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

Subject: The role of the tobacco industry in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

1. The question of the UN system's engagement of the tobacco industry in the context of the 2030 Agenda has become an issue of growing relevance. The following is an attempt to raise the issue at the top political level, following consultations by colleagues with the DSG, who suggested we send this note to you, and with the DG of WHO.
2. The WHO has described the "tobacco epidemic [as] one of the biggest public health threats the world has ever faced, killing more than 8 million people a year." In spite of global efforts to curb tobacco consumption, estimates show that "projected number of smokers will remain at around 1.1 billion by 2025" despite existing tobacco control measures. However, the SDG's imperative to "leave no one behind" implies the need to also improve the lives of the more than one billion people that will continue using tobacco products and, indeed, of all who are employed by the industry throughout the world.
3. While, the 2030 Agenda represents a fundamental shift in thinking, explicitly acknowledging the interconnectedness of prosperous business, a thriving society and a healthy environment, we are arguably still not seeing sufficient impact from partnerships with the private sector, which plays a key role in creating economic prosperity, as an essential mechanism for sustainable development.
4. It can be argued that businesses which are legitimate enough to pay taxes to governments should also be legitimate enough to participate in discussions concerning joint efforts to minimize health risks and address other problems of a common nature. This is particularly true for those that have highly advanced research efforts to minimize the harmful effects of their own products.
5. The DG of WHO has made it clear that he is bound by the decision of the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) to totally exclude the tobacco industry from any contact with the UN system. However, the policy question remains as to the appropriateness of this total ban, vis-à-vis the goal of the SDGs to "not leave anyone behind."
6. There is, thus, a case to be made for considering a more nuanced approach by the UN system vis-à-vis the tobacco industry. In fact, a blanket exclusion of the entire tobacco industry from the Non-Communicable Diseases group discussions for one, to say nothing of their expulsion from the UN Global Compact, may be counterproductive to our ambition to deliver the 2030 Agenda.
7. This note will also be shared with my successor.



Michael Møller
UNOG Director-General
28 June 2019

Copy: Deputy Secretary-General
Director-General of WHO