

From the World Health Organisation



The United Nations establishes a focal point on tobacco

In 1970, the World Health Organisation's (WHO's) governing body, the World Health Assembly (WHA), adopted its first resolution acknowledging the serious health consequences of tobacco use.¹ In subsequent years, this resolution was followed by 12 more, increasingly urgent in tone, calling for more and more comprehensive actions to control tobacco use.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, however, even as WHO was documenting the seriousness of the tobacco pandemic as a major public health problem, other agencies of the United Nations (UN) were actively encouraging expansion of tobacco agriculture and marketing. Worldwide tobacco production has increased continuously since 1970, and continues to increase to this day.

The WHA clearly recognised that, even if the health consequences of tobacco use were starkly clear to health workers, solutions to this problem involved questions of agriculture, trade, taxation, foreign exchange, employment, and other public policy questions far beyond the mandate of WHO. This concern culminated in the adoption of a resolution by the WHA in 1992 calling on the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), the main coordinating body for the UN, to discuss the need for multisectoral collaboration within the UN system on tobacco or health.²

ECOSOC took up this challenge, and on 30 July 1993, adopted its own resolution on the subject.³ The resolution was sponsored by Australia, and co-sponsored by the US and Canada. More than 50 countries are voting members of ECOSOC, and the Council adopted the resolution by consensus with no dissent.

The resolution proposes nine different actions to improve the effectiveness of comprehensive tobacco control through a variety of multisectoral strategies to be undertaken by every country and among UN and other international organisations.

Key among these action proposals is a request to the Secretary-General of the UN:

"...to establish, under the auspices of the World Health Organization and within existing resources, a focal point, within existing institutions of the United Nations system, on the subject of multi-sectoral collaboration on the economic and social aspects of tobacco production and consumption, taking into particular account the serious health consequences of tobacco use".

ECOSOC went on to request the Secretary-General,

"...to ensure that the work of the United Nations system focal point begin as soon as possible and that

each contributing agency, in consultation with concerned Member States, together with the focal point, develop, before 31 December 1993, individual plans of work, setting out deadlines and achievement milestones, for their agency's contribution to multi-sectoral collaboration on tobacco or health...".

The UN Secretariat has acted expediently to implement this resolution. A focal point on tobacco has been created within the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), and all the agencies of the UN system have been invited to submit plans of work concerning tobacco, to the focal point.

Significant progress has already been achieved in improving multisectoral collaboration on tobacco or health. Already, the World Bank has adopted a policy that is more consistent with WHO's clear policy of discouraging tobacco use; the World Bank will grant no new loans for tobacco growing or manufacturing projects.⁴

UNCTAD and the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) have produced reports on the economic significance of tobacco, and FAO has indicated that it will provide assistance on request to Member States that wish to reduce their dependence on tobacco.

Like the WHO, whose offices are entirely smoke-free worldwide, UNICEF has adopted very firm policies in favour of a tobacco-free life. The headquarters and regional offices of UNICEF are smoke-free.

The Assembly of the International Civil Aviation Organisation adopted a resolution in 1992, urging all Contracting States

"...to take measures as soon as possible to restrict smoking progressively on all international passenger flights with the objective of implementing complete smoking bans by 1 July 1996."⁵

However, much more work remains to be done. The newly created UN Focal Point on Tobacco should be able to do a great deal to stimulate further multisectoral collaboration in favour of comprehensive and effective programmes of tobacco control. The UN Focal Point on Tobacco can be contacted at the following address:

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1 World Health Organisation. *Handbook of resolutions and decisions of the World Health Assembly and the Executive*

- Board, Volume I, 1948-1972. Limitation of smoking, WHA23.32. World Health Organisation, Geneva, 1973, p 110.
- 2 World Health Organisation. *Handbook of resolutions and decisions of the World Health Assembly and the Executive Board, Volume III*. Multisectoral collaboration on WHO's programme 'tobacco or health', WHA45.20. World Health Organisation, Geneva, 1993.
- 3 United Nations Economic and Social Council. *Resolutions*

- and decisions adopted by the Economic and Social Council at its substantive session of 1993 (Geneva, 28 June-30 July 1993). Multisectoral collaboration on tobacco or health: 1993/79. New York, 1993, pp 192-4.
- 4 The World Bank. *World development report 1993: investing in health*. London: Oxford University Press, 1993, p 89.
- 5 International Civil Aviation Organization. *Smoking restrictions on international passenger flights: resolution 714*. A29-WP/280/P/104. Montreal, October 1992.

