Statement on behalf of WHO, including the Secretariat of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, an entity hosted by WHO

Agenda Item 4 of the Third Session of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee to develop an international legally binding instrument on plastic pollution, including in the marine environment (INC3)

Nairobi, Kenya 13 – 19 November 2023

WHO and the Secretariat of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC) appreciates the work done by the Chair and the Secretariat for preparing the Zero Draft for discussion this week. While we acknowledge the strong commitment to protecting health and environment, we note there are several areas where further specific provisions on health aspects may be needed.

WHO’s view of the zero draft is guided by three overriding principles:

1) The treaty’s objective should be broad, pursuing the highest attainable standard of human and environmental health, with priorities given to areas of implementation that contribute most strongly.

2) Member States need support to address the human health implications of plastics and plastic pollution including health hazards and exposures associated with plastic polymers, chemicals and additives, as well microplastics and nanoplastics which are increasingly found in the environment and human biota.

3) There is a need to support Member States in ensuring access to safe and effective health products that are of good quality and are affordable, accessible and appropriate to those that need them.
The use of plastics in healthcare is growing and accounts for approximately 2 percent of all production. Plastics are important in healthcare because of their role in preventing disease, improving quality of life and saving lives. For example they are used in infection, prevention and control, delivery of medicines, and in implants and prosthetics.

Provisions should be included in the treaty for Healthcare use of plastics to have specific considerations to ensure that the treaty does not inadvertently disrupt access to safe, and effective health products.

Having said that, the use of plastics in healthcare can be made more sustainable including by eliminating unnecessary use, reuse when possible, innovating product and packaging design and strengthening waste management practices, a win-win outcome for both health and the environment. Some of these transformations may however require time, research and investment.

WHO is aware of a growing number of successful mutually beneficial initiatives and solutions at health facility and national levels are ready for sharing the lessons learned and for scaling-up. WHO commits to promoting such information more widely.

The Alliance for Transformation Action on Climate and Health (ATACH) is an example at the international level. This initiative of almost 80 countries includes a working group on Supply Chains which is playing a significant role in mobilizing health systems to create a collective demand to reduce and create low carbon, sustainable procurement practices.

Another initiative is in tobacco control. In early 2024 the Conference of the Parties to the WHO FCTC will formally address the environmental concerns associated with tobacco for the first time. Cigarette butts contribute substantially to plastic pollution and with cigarette filters offering no proven public health benefits their elimination could dramatically and visibly reduce pollution and promote public health.

Reporting and information exchange regarding potential health risks is critical to avoiding preventable health harms. We urge the inclusion of additional requirements for Member States (and other stakeholders where applicable) to improve transparency,
facilitate exchange and reporting of information regarding the potential health risks within the scope of the treaty.

In closing WHO is committed to support and collaborate with Member States in the development and implementation of the treaty. We are also committed to continuing to strengthen our outreach to the health community, WHO scientific, technical and policy processes and networks, including through continuing the WHO Plastics and Health Dialogue series established at INC2.

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