



**BRIEFING  
PAPERS**

## **Global State of Tobacco Harm Reduction**



# **The Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) and the Conference of the Parties (COP): an explainer**

**Update  
September  
2025<sup>1</sup>**

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## Introduction

The Eleventh Meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP) to the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) will see government delegations from around the world meet in Geneva, Switzerland, from 17–22 November 2025.

This GSTHR Briefing Paper explains what the FCTC is, what COP meetings are, how they operate and who attends; it is accompanied by a second Briefing Paper, 'Tobacco harm reduction and the FCTC: issues and challenges at COP11'.

## What is a Framework Convention?

In international law, a treaty is normally understood to be a binding, formal agreement that establishes obligations between two or more states on matters that pertain to the interests of those states. However, with some global issues it is difficult to reach agreement on the wording of an overarching treaty that binds all the countries involved.

In such instances, a type of treaty called a **framework convention** can be used to establish broader commitments, leaving the setting of specific actions and targets either to subsequent more detailed agreements (usually called **protocols**), or to national legislation. The framework model is used in the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, as well as for the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

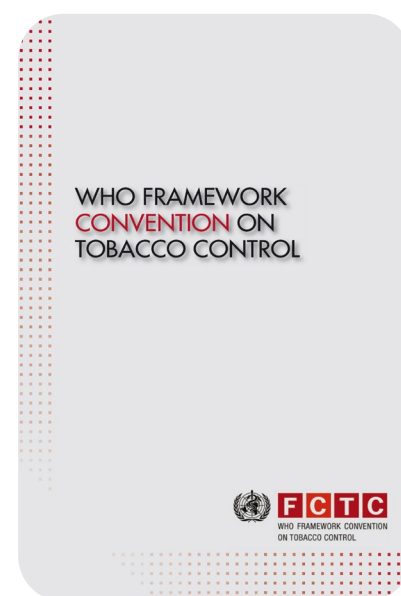
## What is the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC)?

The Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) was developed in response to the international nature of the public health challenge of tobacco use.<sup>2</sup> It was the first treaty negotiated under the auspices of the World Health Organization (WHO). After four years of negotiations, the WHO FCTC was adopted by the World Health Assembly on 21 May 2003 and entered into force on 27 February 2005.

The objective of the FCTC, as set out in Article 3, is “to protect present and future generations from the devastating health, social, environmental and economic consequences of tobacco consumption and exposure to tobacco smoke.”<sup>3</sup> The full text of the Convention can be found [here](#).<sup>4</sup> The treaty is elaborated in a number of guidelines.<sup>5</sup>

The **Preamble** to the FCTC has several **recitals** (giving context to the Convention) which recognise the need to reduce death and disease from the use of tobacco. These recitals are given within the context of the universal right to health.

- » *Reflecting...*the devastating worldwide...consequences of...exposure to tobacco smoke.
- » *Seriously concerned* about increase in worldwide consumption...particularly in developing countries...



- » *Recalling* Article 12 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights... which states that it is the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health.
- » *Determined* to promote measures of tobacco control based on current and relevant scientific, technical and economic consideration.

## Which countries are covered by the FCTC?

To date, 183 countries have both **signed** and **ratified** the FCTC,<sup>6</sup> meaning it has been approved at the national level.<sup>7</sup> These countries are referred to as **Parties** to the Convention. Six countries have signed the Convention but not ratified it. Nine have done neither.

## What does the FCTC cover?

The provisions of the FCTC are set out in a number of **articles**.

The scope of the Convention is laid out in Article 1(d) which defines tobacco control as “a range of supply, demand and harm reduction strategies that aim to improve the health of a population by eliminating or reducing their consumption of tobacco products and exposure to tobacco smoke”.

Article 5.3 requires that “in setting and implementing their public health policies with respect to tobacco control, Parties shall act to protect these policies from commercial and other vested interests of the tobacco industry in accordance with national law”.

Subsequent articles deal with measures deemed to be necessary to reduce both the demand for and the supply of tobacco products. However, there are no articles dealing specifically with harm reduction.

### Measures relating to the reduction of demand for tobacco:

- Article 6: Price and tax measures to reduce the demand for tobacco
- Article 7: Non-price measures to reduce the demand for tobacco
- Article 8: Protection from exposure to tobacco smoke
- Article 9: Regulation of the contents of tobacco products
- Article 10: Regulation of tobacco product disclosures
- Article 11: Packaging and labelling of tobacco products
- Article 12: Education, communication, training and public awareness
- Article 13: Tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship
- Article 14: Demand reduction measures concerning tobacco dependence and cessation



## Measures relating to the reduction of the supply of tobacco:

Article 15: Illicit trade in tobacco products

Article 16: Sales to and by minors

Article 17: Provision of support for economically viable alternative activities

Article 18: Protection of the environment and the health of persons

## What is the Conference of the Parties (COP)?

As noted earlier, 183 countries have both signed and ratified the FCTC,<sup>8</sup> and these countries are referred to as Parties to the FCTC. The Conference of the Parties (COP) is the Convention's governing body. It is scheduled to meet every two years and is where in-person discussions, negotiations and decisions about the implementation of the FCTC and international tobacco control measures take place between the Parties.

## Why are COP meetings important?

Decisions taken both before and during COP meetings play a significant role in determining the direction of international tobacco control policies and how these are implemented at national level.

As well as influencing how countries respond to tobacco smoking, in recent years COP meetings have also begun to address safer nicotine products (SNP), such as nicotine vapes (e-cigarettes), snus, nicotine pouches and heated tobacco products. Consumer access to SNP is crucial to realise the public health potential of tobacco harm reduction in the global fight against tobacco-related death and disease.

## Who attends COP meetings?

The Parties are the decision makers. Parties (countries that have both signed and ratified the FCTC, or who have acceded to the FCTC), can take an active role in discussions and decisions. Signatories (countries that have signed but not ratified the convention) have observer status and can intervene during the discussions; these include the USA, Argentina, Morocco, Cuba, Switzerland and the Dominican Republic.

The positions that Parties take are usually discussed well before the COP, with like-minded countries and the WHO trying to align and build coalitions. Much of the discussion and positioning goes on in the 'Pre-COP' meetings organised by the WHO and the FCTC Secretariat with each of the six WHO Regions (Africa, Americas, Europe, Western Pacific, South-East Asia and Eastern Mediterranean).



Parties can speak for themselves at the COP but are encouraged to allow the region's nominated country to lead. The EU has its own procedures and the Working Party on Public Health meets to discuss the COP agenda and form policy positions ahead of the COP, known as the 'EU Common Position' (the mandate for the EU Commission to present the unified view of its 27 Member States).

Delegations primarily consist of health officials, although other domestic departmental interests concerning, for example, finance, business and trade, might also attend. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and subject specialists may also be represented on delegations.

## What happens at COP meetings?

At COP meetings, decisions are taken by consensus. Although there is a voting procedure, it has never been used. In theory, every Party carries equal weight, but in reality, the most vocal Parties are the ones driving decisions.

The meeting opens with the adoption of the agenda, followed by a plenary session which is an introduction to the COP, focused on the theme of the session and prepared statements from the Parties on the progress on the implementation of the FCTC in their respective countries. The meeting then breaks into two groups where the main business is conducted. Committee A deals with policy matters and Committee B with administrative matters, including funding.

All reports due for consideration at the COP must be made publicly available 75 days before the meeting.<sup>9</sup> Committee A will consider the reports that have been submitted, sometimes with a draft decision note attached. A discussion will then take place to consider both the report and, if attached, the draft decision. If there is no existing draft decision note, one will be drawn up and discussed in the room. If nobody objects to either the report or the draft decision, then that becomes COP policy.

However, if just one country raises an objection, then another round of discussion takes place, perhaps to change the wording of the decision. There can be several iterations of this process until the objection is withdrawn. Failing that, the meeting chair might ask Committee B to consider the issue or simply push it through on the basis that one objection cannot be allowed to hold up the process.

If several countries lodge objections which cannot be resolved, the chair can call for a drafting group to be set up to resolve differences. These drafting groups meet outside working hours of the COP sessions, without translation, and under the leadership of a Party that takes the role of the chair.

At the start of each day, the Regional Groups meet to discuss the day's agenda including whatever decision has emerged from drafting groups. There can be considerable pressure





at this point to convince continuing dissenters to fall into line, including comments in the daily COP bulletin. The bulletin is written by members of the Global Alliance for Tobacco Control (GATC) – see below.

## Which other bodies contribute to COP meetings?

Although Parties are the ultimate decision makers, a number of other bodies have considerable influence on the agenda, the provision of documents and the tone and substance of the meeting.

### The FCTC Secretariat

The role of the FCTC Secretariat<sup>10</sup> is to support and implement the business of the COP between meetings.

While in theory this body simply administers the COP, it plays a significant role in determining what the agenda looks like, as well as shaping the policy direction. The Secretariat organises many of the meetings which take place between each COP, providing agendas and documents, and it has a wider advocacy role in promoting the FCTC aims and objectives across the UN. It also supports the work of the FCTC Knowledge Hubs.<sup>11</sup>

### The WHO

The WHO hosts the FCTC Secretariat.

The WHO provides much of the documentation that informs the COP, for example, the Report on Research and Evidence on Novel and Emerging Tobacco Products and the reports from the WHO Study Group on Tobacco Product Regulation (TobRegNet).<sup>12,13</sup> Another report comes from The Tobacco Laboratory Network (TobLabNet) which develops standard testing and measurement methods for tobacco products.<sup>14</sup>



### The Bureau of the Conference of the Parties

The six members of the Bureau of the Conference of the Parties are elected at the end of each COP.<sup>15</sup> The Bureau meets regularly to prepare everything for the following COP session. It also:

- » supervises intersessional work including working groups/expert groups;
- » consults with the FCTC Secretariat to define the agenda for COP sessions;
- » provides guidance to the Secretariat in the preparation of reports, recommendations and draft decisions submitted to the COP;
- » reviews applications of NGOs and intergovernmental organisations for observer status;
- » works with Regional Coordinators and FCTC Secretariat before and during the COP.

The current members of the Bureau are:

- Americas Region** – Dr Reina Roa (Panama) – President
- African Region** – Dr Judith Segnon-Agueh (Benin) – Vice-President
- European Region** – Dr Péter Földi (Hungary) – Vice-President
- Western Pacific Region** – Dr Noraryana Binti Hassan (Malaysia), Vice-President
- South-East Asia Region** – Professor Nuntavarn Vichit-Vadakan (Thailand), Vice-President and Rapporteur
- Eastern Mediterranean Region** – Dr Jawad Al-Lawati (Oman), Vice-President.<sup>16</sup>

The Bureau disseminates information to the regional coordinators who are responsible for liaising with the Parties. A previous COP meeting might mandate the Bureau to update a particular report, or set of reports, or possibly to commission a new one. This work might include the engagement of experts but should also involve consultation with the Parties via the Regional Groups to collect national data for the report.

## WHO Regional Coordinators

Like the Bureau, the Regional Coordinators are elected at the COP. The Regional Coordinators observe the meetings of the Bureau and perform the following functions:

- » liaise with the officer of the Bureau representing the region, and facilitate consultations with the Parties in the region between the sessions of the COP; this is done with a view to informing the work of the Bureau, and keeping Parties informed of the Bureau's work;
- » receive working documents or proposals of the Bureau, and ensure they are circulated to the Parties in the region;
- » collect and send comments on such documents or proposals to the officer of the Bureau;
- » act as a channel for the exchange of information, including a copy of invitations to the meetings for the implementation of the Convention, and coordination of activities with other regional coordinators.

As of September 2025, in a change from previous years, the names of individuals acting as Regional Coordinators have not been published, with only countries identified instead, as follows: Cote d'Ivoire for the African Region, Canada for the Region of the Americas, Tunisia for the Eastern Mediterranean Region, Spain for the European Region, Timor-Leste for the South-East Asia Region and New Zealand for the Western Pacific Region.<sup>17</sup>



## Which non-state observers are present at the COP?

A number of international **intergovernmental organizations** (IGO) have **observer status**, such as the World Bank Group and the International Labour Organization.<sup>18</sup>

The Preamble to the FCTC recognises the “special contribution of **non-governmental organizations** and other members of civil society...to tobacco control efforts nationally and internationally...”. Applications by NGOs for observer status are processed by the FCTC Secretariat which makes recommendations and are decided by the COP. A list of accredited NGOs can be found [here](#).<sup>19</sup>

Smaller civil society anti-tobacco organisations can participate as members of the NGO tobacco control umbrella body, formerly known as the Framework Convention Alliance (FCA), but now rebranded as the **Global Alliance for Tobacco Control** (GATC).<sup>20</sup> A full list of member organisations does not appear on the GATC website. To date, membership has only been granted to organisations which agree with the prevailing tobacco control consensus.

To date, no advocacy groups representing people directly affected by tobacco control measures have been considered eligible for observer status or membership of the Alliance. This includes independent groups representing people who smoke and users of safer nicotine products.

Observer status and Alliance membership are only open to those with no connections to the tobacco industry, however tangential or historical.

## Conclusion

Like all international agreements, the FCTC is a complex instrument; it is also one of the most widely adopted in the history of the United Nations. The COP meetings that take place every two years bring all Parties to the table. The objective of the delegations is to advance global tobacco control, as governments around the world continue to struggle with the social and economic costs of tobacco use. The FCTC came into force two decades ago, but globally, there remain a billion people who smoke and eight million tobacco-related deaths a year.

In our accompanying Briefing Paper, ‘Tobacco harm reduction and the FCTC: issues and challenges at COP11’, we consider whether the FCTC is making effective progress towards its objectives – and how COP11 is likely to respond to the public health opportunities offered by tobacco harm reduction.





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For further information about the Global State of Tobacco Harm Reduction's work, or the points raised in this **GSTHR Briefing Paper**, please contact [info@gsthr.org](mailto:info@gsthr.org)

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Our funding: The GSTHR project is produced with the help of a grant from **Global Action to End Smoking** (formerly known as Foundation for a Smoke-Free World), an independent, US non-profit 501(c)(3) grant-making organisation, accelerating science-based efforts worldwide to end the smoking epidemic. Global Action played no role in designing, implementing, data analysis, or interpretation of this Briefing Paper. The contents, selection, and presentation of facts, as well as any opinions expressed, are the sole responsibility of the authors and should not be regarded as reflecting the positions of **Global Action to End Smoking**.