

**Rising Concerns: Alarming Surge in E-cigarette Use Among Youth Sparks Urgent Action by WHO**

**CSOs in Ghana call for ban on electronic cigarettes to prevent a public health threat**

The World Health Organization (WHO) on 14th December, 2023 unveiled a technical paper titled "ELECTRONIC CIGARETTE: CALL TO ACTION," which calls for urgent action to control e-cigarettes to protect children, as well as non-smokers and minimize health harms to the population. According to the paper, e-cigarettes as consumer products have not shown to be effective for quitting tobacco use at the population level. Instead, alarming evidence has emerged on adverse population health effects.

The global market of electronic cigarettes, vapes and other new and emerging products are swiftly expanding with a diverse array of enticing flavors aggressively aimed at children and young people. Urgent and resolute action by countries is imperative to shield children from the severe health repercussions associated with these products.

The report also warned that since e-cigarettes are tobacco products that deliver nicotine, which is a highly addictive and toxic substance, they may pose the risk that many of today’s youth who are using e-cigarettes could become tomorrow’s cigarette smokers to continue to feed their nicotine addiction. Moreover, nicotine exposure can harm brain development in ways that may affect the neurological development and mental health of children and adolescents.

This call to action on e-cigarettes by WHO notes that urgent and strong decisive action to prevent uptake of e-cigarettes, which are harmful to health, should be taken to protect children, as well as non-smokers and minimize health harms to the population.

The Vision for Alternative Development, Ghana (VALD Ghana) supports the WHO timely call to action on electronic cigarette uptake among children and young people in Ghana.

Disturbing statistics have shed light on a concerning trend. The gravity of the situation is underscored by recent data from Canada, where e-cigarette use among 16-19-year-olds has doubled between 2017 and 2022. Likewise, England has seen a staggering three-fold increase in the past three years alone. This surge in e-cigarette consumption among young individuals has ignited widespread concerns, with tobacco industries coming under scrutiny for jeopardizing the safety and well-being of our children.

The report by the United States Surgeon General warned that since e-cigarettes are tobacco products that deliver nicotine, which is a highly addictive and toxic substance, they may pose the risk that many of today’s youth who are using e-cigarettes could become tomorrow’s cigarette smokers to continue to feed their nicotine addiction and that nicotine exposure can harm brain development in ways that may affect the neurological development and mental health of children and adolescents.

The e-cigarette market has experienced rapid growth worldwide, with a diverse range of enticing flavors that are glamorizing to target particularly children and young adults. Available through various channels and openly marketed, these products boast a staggering 16,000 flavors and employ tactics like social media advertisements, influencer endorsements, and partnerships with popular sporting brands. Even more concerning is the use of cartoons and sleek designs to attract younger generations. However, behind the alluring packaging lies a dangerous reality.

E-cigarettes contain hazardous chemicals such as acetaldehyde, acrolein, and formaldehyde - substances known to contribute to NCDs like lung diseases, cancers, and cardiovascular diseases. The WHO warns that the health risks associated with e-cigarette use are not to be underestimated.

Recent reports from VALD Ghana indicate that the unregulated use of e-cigarettes for cessation purposes in Ghana has led to misuse and harm to users.

VALD Ghana has raised concerns about the government's approach of taxing electronic cigarette as part of efforts to raise revenue from excise taxes without recourse to public health concerns. The Ghana’s Public Health Act (Act 851) prescribes non tobacco product (electronic cigarette) for cessation purposes only and not for recreation. As it stands now electronic cigarettes are currently available everywhere especially through online sales.

Imposing taxes on e-cigarette products is one strategy that could be used to limit youth access to e-cigarettes. Increasing the prices of these products will dissuade a portion of youth use since they are disproportionately affected by price increase because of their lower purchasing power. It is well established that this strategy has worked with conventional tobacco products and we can reasonably expect that it would be effective for e-cigarettes as well. Taxation not only could reduce e-cigarette use among youth but also generate revenue for the government.

***Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO's Director-General, warns of the early recruitment of children into e-cigarette use and subsequent nicotine addiction. He urges countries to implement stringent measures to safeguard citizens, particularly the youth, against this peril. The tobacco industry's profit-driven motives mislead policies by funding false claims of harm reduction***.

We are by this statement calling on the Government through the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Finance, the Ghana Revenue Authority and the Food and Drugs Authority and other key stakeholders to see this as an urgent national priority.

Countries are taking bold steps aimed at protecting the health rights of their citizens especially children and young people who are the target of the tobacco and other harm industries.

VALD Ghana in solidarity with other CSOs call for a national ban on electronic cigarette and other new and emerging products being fueled by the tobacco industry and their allies as a safer alternative to traditional cigarette. Many countries have taken the lead to ban these products and Ghana can do same.

All of us working to advance the great cause of global health should not waiver in our commitment to support the development of healthy societies. In doing so, we should keep in mind that tobacco use is the world’s leading preventable cause of death, killing more than 7 million people per year.

Moving forward, we should be guided by the lessons from history and available scientific evidence and redouble our efforts to support globally the full implementation of the FCTC’s demand and supply reduction measures to control tobacco use in all its forms, including e-cigarettes.

**End:**

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