

China, at the center of this costly 'epidemic', is also at the heart of global efforts to stop it, according to WHO

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Tobacco use in China is said to be the major driver behind the rapid increase in rates of non-communicable diseases, or NCDs, such as cardiovascular disease, cancer, chronic respiratory disease and diabetes, according to the World Health Organization (WHO).

Of the 8.6 million deaths in China from NCDs in 2012, more than one-third (36 percent) were premature — that is, in people under the age of 70. More than 3 million people in China are dying young every year from diseases that are largely caused by preventable risk factors, such as tobacco use, the WHO says.

Lauren Johnston, a China specialist and CEO of the Melbourne-based think tank New South Economics, said: "I think there must be a massive backlog of smoking-related illnesses still to come in China.

"Too many of the people alive aged 35-65 have smoked a lot over their lives and many of the diseases associated with smoking have yet to catch up with them," she told *China Daily Asia Weekly*.

"I think the interesting statistics would be among the smoking rates of persons aged 15-40."

The WHO says tobacco use hurts families, impoverishes communities, exacerbates inequalities, and damages economies and societies. It says China is at the center of "this epidemic", being the world's biggest producer and consumer of tobacco, and is at the heart of global efforts to stop it.

It is estimated that 44 percent of the world's tobacco is consumed in China. More than 1 million people die of tobacco-related diseases every year in China, with many of them in the "prime of their productive years", said the WHO in its report *The Bill China Cannot Afford: Health, Economic and Social Costs of China's Tobacco Epidemic*.

Released last year, the joint study with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) said smoking "imposes a financial burden on low-income smokers and their families, but the illness, disability and death caused by tobacco use extracts an even greater cost".

"With such high rates of smoking among Chinese men, tobacco use is killing or disabling the main wage earner in many Chinese families (especially families on low incomes) and plunging those already on the margins into poverty," the report said.

It warned that if nothing is done to slow the trend, smoking-related diseases "are on track to claim more



Young students at a school in Handan, North China's Hebei province, wear masks calling on the public to stop smoking, on May 30, 2016. More than 1 million people die of tobacco-related diseases every year in China, with many in the 'prime of their productive years', the World Health Organization says.

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High toll of tobacco use

than 200 million lives in China this century".

"This will decrease economic productivity and push tens of millions of people into poverty. It will also place increasing demands on the Chinese social welfare and health systems, as well as the private sector, and will further entrench already growing inequalities," the report said.

"The health and broader (social, economic, environmental) costs of tobacco use add up to a bill that China cannot afford," it added.

The total economic cost — that is, direct and indirect costs combined — of tobacco use in China in 2014 amounted to a staggering \$57 billion, which was roughly 0.55 percent of China's total gross domestic product for that year, according to WHO data.

This was almost double the \$33 billion that tobacco use was estimated to have cost China's economy in 2008 and represents a 1,000 percent — or tenfold — increase in the estimated economic costs since 2000.

The increase is the result of both more people being diagnosed with tobacco-related illness over the last decade and a half and increasing healthcare expenditure.

Analysts say this should be of concern at any time, especially so when Chinese labor costs are increasing and there is a transition toward a more services-based economy.

Not acting to reduce tobacco use will aggravate the economic and social impact of an aging population and increase the odds of a future economic slowdown.

Tobacco is also hurting the very fabric of China's society, both by impoverishing people already on very low incomes and making it difficult for others to escape poverty, further widening the gap between rich and poor and exacerbating the problem of inequality in Chinese society.

According to the WHO/UNDP report, "This happens in several ways: expenditure on tobacco in low-income households diverts funds from necessities such as food, education and healthcare; the costs of treating tobacco-related illness (such as cancer and heart disease) can be catastrophically high for already poor families, especially in the absence of social and health insurance that covers the full cost of treatment; and the early death of a primary income earner from tobacco-related illness can cause a family to lose its primary source of income — from which it takes 10-20 years on average to recover financially.

"The impact of this is particularly profound in a country such as China, where a primary income earner's dependents may include not only his or her partner and children, but also his parents and parents-in-law."

While it has been acknowledged that China has made remarkable progress in lifting people out of poverty — 439 million between 1990 and 2011 — the country is committed to completely eradicating poverty by 2020.

But, by 2016, with 56 million people in China living in rural poverty and over 40 percent of them

impoverished because of healthcare costs, the microeconomic impact of China's high rates of male smoking became a direct threat to that goal of eradicating poverty.

While the health, economic and social costs of tobacco use in China are colossal, the policy measures contained in the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC) — which China ratified in 2005 — provide a clear prescription for reducing tobacco use, say the WHO and UNDP.

"Full implementation of the WHO FCTC will avert some of the costs of tobacco use, as well as put China on track to a healthier and more sustainable economic future," their report said.

The WHO says a "rapid scaling up" of tobacco control policies would deliver significant health, economic and social benefits to China — and help realize the vision of a Healthy China.

Nathan Grills, of the Melbourne School of Population and Global Health, at The University of Melbourne, said policy initiatives are the most effective approach to tobacco control.

"These policies save lives," he told *China Daily Asia Weekly*.

"Taxation, limiting advertising, banning smoking in public places, are all effective in decreasing smoking rates and saving lives."

He said in many countries, taxing tobacco has been extremely effective in bringing the rates of smoking down.

"Health warnings are effective at raising awareness about dangers and promoting behaviors that lead to quitting," he said.

Grills said smoking is one of the world's leading causes of premature death and disability.

"More than 5 million people die annually from tobacco ... the majority of these in China and India ... The benefits from tobacco farming and production are far outweighed by the health costs to the economy of tobacco usage. Also, people who don't smoke are likely to take less sick days and are therefore more productive," he said.

The WHO says that increasing the retail price of cigarettes by 50 percent in China, for example, would increase revenue to the government by around \$66 billion annually.

"Crucially, a price increase in this order of magnitude would prevent as many as 20 million premature deaths (in China) over 50 years, and in doing so help to avert nearly 8 million people being plunged into poverty," according to the WHO.

Around 13 million — mostly poor — people would be saved from facing catastrophically high medical expenditures.

"The people who stand to benefit most from effective tobacco control policies are the poor. Tobacco control, therefore, is good not only for China's health, but also for its society and economy; it can help to deliver on national (and international) goals of reducing poverty and inequality," the WHO/UNDP report said.