The Euro region of the WHO consists of 53 countries, of which 50 are Parties to the FCTC. The region covers Europe, but also a number of countries in western and central Asia. This annual meeting was organised by Kristina Mauer-Stender, the point person in the WHO Euro region for tobacco, and covered two topics: tobacco taxation (Article 6) and policy coordination (Article 5, excluding 5.3).

A substantial amount of time was spent discussing the link between tobacco control (and especially tobacco taxation) and the Sustainable Development Goals. There are 17 SGDs, with 169 individual targets. SDG number 3 specifically focuses on good health, although one could argue that tobacco control has an impact on a range of the other SDGs. Within SDG 3, the FCTC gets a special mention. I had an opportunity to talk about the Knowledge Hub: what it intends to do, procedures, the content of a typical workshop, etc. There is substantial demand for the Knowledge Hub.

- We were approached by the WHO country official (Alina Altymysheva) on behalf of the Ministry of Health (Nurgul Ibraeva) of Kyrgyzstan to support them in their tax modelling.

- Next year Bulgaria hosts a high-level meeting of Ministries in Finance in Sofia. Florence Bertellini of the ESPN (?) is organising a side meeting on tobacco taxation, and the Knowledge Hub is invited to be there.

Other issues that I picked up on are the following:

- Oleg Salagay, a high official from the Ministry of Health in Russia (and the host of the COP in India) has suggested that we work together on issues of alcohol and tobacco in the BRICS countries. Alcohol consumption in Russia has dropped by about 50% since 2008. Impressive.

- Earmarking (especially “soft earmarking”) of tobacco taxes is an increasingly important issue among many countries. For many countries (possibly SA as well) earmarking is a non-starter, but it does have significant political and popular appeal. Sofia Delipalla of the University of Macedonia in Greece is doing some work in this area, but this is a greenfield for research and policy work.

- A very interesting discussion, and a warning for us doing modelling work, is the experience of Belgium. The excise tax was increased substantially and it was expected that about 250 million extra euros would be collected. In the end only 50 million extra euros were collected. The tobacco industry falsely claimed that revenue decreased, but the fact of the matter was that the extra revenues were well below budget. It seems that the modellers did not account for the fact that many smokers in neighbouring countries buy “cheap” cigarettes in Belgium, and that the tax increase
substantially decreased those sales. Also, there was forestalling by the tobacco industry. The lesson for us are the following: (1) we need to be aware of country-specific issues that could substantially influence the results, and (2) geographically small countries might be more prone to such things than large countries.