

How do you solve a problem like tobacco?



"We stand at a crossroads of the tobacco epidemic, with the future in our hands." So reads the headline of the fifth edition of *The Tobacco Atlas*, launched on March 19, 2015, at the World Conference on Tobacco or Health in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. The Atlas, released by the American Cancer Society and the World Lung Foundation, states that 5 million people are killed every year by tobacco and there remain more than 1 billion current smokers in the world. The rising prevalence of smoking in low-income and middle-income countries is outpacing the effect of global tobacco control measures, and the growing popularity of alternative products, such as smokeless tobacco and e-cigarettes, poses a substantial threat to recent successes in the denormalisation of smoking.

10 years ago, WHO launched the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control in an effort to challenge the rapidly developing global smoking epidemic. The treaty's primary components include launching public health media campaigns, banning product advertising, prohibiting smoking in public places, improving access to cessation support, and imposing high taxes on tobacco goods. Some of these strategies have been effective—32 countries adopted complete smoking bans in work and public places between 2007 and 2012. However, despite clear benefits, other efforts have been stalled by aggressive tobacco industry campaigns and intimidated governments—according to Prabhat Jha at the University of Toronto, if excise tax on tobacco was tripled in most low-income and middle-income countries then cigarette prices would rise by 100% and consumption would fall by 40%.

In 2014, the tobacco industry made US\$44.1 billion profit, which equates to about US\$7000 for each tobacco-related death. Yet according to the Atlas, the industry is still attempting to thwart tobacco control measures with vigorous marketing in growing economies such as China (where average cigarette consumption for a smoker is 22 per day) and spending millions of dollars subverting plain packaging legislation and public health campaigns in countries such as Australia, Sri Lanka, Peru, and the USA.

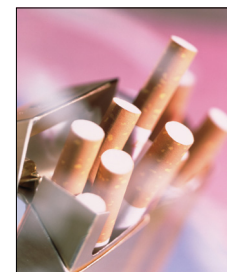
Of particular concern to low-income and middle-income countries is the ongoing intimidation of governments with the threat of litigation for breaching international trade agreements. Uruguay is fighting a

legal challenge brought by Philip Morris International, which is claiming compensation for damages resulting from the country's antismoking legislation. Australia has been battling big tobacco in the courts since 2011 over its plain packaging ruling, but smaller countries without the necessary resources for such costly legal battles are at risk of being browbeaten into moderating their antitobacco laws, if they propose any at all. On March 18, 2015, Bloomberg Philanthropies and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation launched an Anti-Tobacco Trade Litigation Fund to financially support resource-poor countries in such legal battles. Later this year, the International Monetary Foundation is set to release documentation supporting higher taxes on tobacco products. These measures should hopefully give low-income and middle-income countries the courage to stand up to big tobacco and introduce the necessary laws to protect their citizens from the harms of tobacco exposure.

Some courageous governments are already leading the way. The Tasmanian upper house is currently considering an amendment to the Public Health Act 1997 to make it illegal for retailers to sell, supply, or gift tobacco products to anyone born after Jan 1, 2000—the Public Health Amendment (Tobacco-Free Generation) Bill 2014. If successful, the amendment could be made law as early as 2018, allowing Tasmania to create the first tobacco-free generation.

The experts gathered in Abu Dhabi were united in the belief that we are at a crucial point in the war on tobacco. If trends continue, then by 2025 there will be about 1.1 billion current smokers in the world, with low-income and middle-income countries bearing the greatest burden of prevalence and effects on chronic respiratory diseases and lung cancer. On March 13, *The Lancet* published a three-paper Series calling for a tobacco-free world by 2040—the aim is to see less than 5% of adults using tobacco products by that year. To this end, it is imperative that an ambitious tobacco reduction target is included in WHO's post-2015 UN Sustainable Development Goals. To succeed, there must be close monitoring of the tobacco industry's behaviour, with culpability for misconduct, and governments should emulate Tasmania's courage and strive to phase out the sale of tobacco products completely.

■ [The Lancet Respiratory Medicine](#)



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Published Online
March 26, 2015
[http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S2213-2600\(15\)00114-9](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S2213-2600(15)00114-9)

This online publication has been corrected. The corrected version first appeared at thelancet.com/respiratory on April 6, 2014

For *The Tobacco Atlas* see <http://www.tobaccoatlas.org/>

For the commentary by Prabhat Jha see [Comment Lancet 2015, 385: 918–20](#)

For details of Tasmania's tobacco-free generation see www.smokefree Tasmania.com

For *The Lancet's tobacco-free world Series* see www.thelancet.com/series/tobacco-free-world