TOBACCO CONTROL: THREATS AND OPPORTUNITIES DURING COVID-19

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OUTLINE

• Background
• Opportunities:
  – Awareness of the harms of tobacco products
  – Smoking cessation
  – Sales bans and restrictions: upsides

• Threats:
  – Tobacco industry interference
  – Coping with stress during the pandemic & nicotine controversy
  – Sales bans and restrictions: downsides

• Lessons for stakeholders:
  – Government
  – Tobacco control advocates & public health scientists
BACKGROUND

- Tobacco smoking is a known risk factor for many respiratory diseases including COPD, emphysema, and pneumonia.
- Smoking affects the lungs, reducing their capacity to function and to fight diseases.
- SARS-CoV-2 predominantly affects the respiratory system.
- Early studies from China (and later from other countries) suggested that there was an increased risk for smokers who contract SARS-CoV-2 to experience worsened disease outcomes and death.
- COVID-19 shed more light on the importance of tobacco control and the harms of tobacco use.
- This led to some governments taking stringent steps as means of curbing the spread of SARS-CoV-2 and to protect their health systems from collapse.
Tobacco control: Opportunities during covid-19
Increased awareness and cessation

- Increased awareness of the harms caused by tobacco at population level
- Increased awareness of cessation, benefits of quitting and cessation aid options*
- Increased volume of calls to national quit line (SA)
- Increased motivation and intention to quit, quit attempts and successful quitting
- Decreased smoking rates among some smokers
Number of people quitting smoking at ten-year high thanks to 'change in attitudes during COVID-19 pandemic'. Smoking prevalence in England is at an all-time low.

Sophia Ankel, Business Insider US
Aug 08, 2020, 05:35 PM

COVID-19 Pandemic Stress Drives Two-Thirds of India's Young Adult Smokers to Quit

NEWS PROVIDED BY
The Foundation for a Smoke-Free World →
May 10, 2020, 22:30 ET
COVID-19 LOCKDOWN TOBACCO BAN

• **Total Ban:**
  - On sales of tobacco products
    - South Africa, India, Botswana

• **Partial ban:**
  - Ban on smoking in public places
    - Spain: First in Galicia and Canary Islands; later nationwide
LOCKDOWN BANS AND RESTRICTIONS: UPSIDES

- Increased public awareness about the harms caused by tobacco use
- Increased intention to quit
- Increased quit attempts
- Increased quit rates
Tobacco control: Threats during covid-19
TOBACCO CONTROL: THREATS DURING COVID-19

• Tobacco industry interference – biggest threat
  – Taking government to court to remove bans and restrictions (SA)
  – Efforts to establish working relationships with governments (against WHO FCTC Article 5.3) by:
    • Joining the COVID-19 vaccine race
    • Donating to government COVID-19 funds
    • Donating COVID-19 related PPEs and hospital equipment
  – Pushing back on tobacco control measures like excise tax increase (Indonesia) and ban on menthol (EU)
  – Marketing their products using the pandemic themes (see next slide)
Tobacco, vaping industries seize opportunities in coronavirus with freebies, donations

Running low on surgical masks during the pandemic? You can get two for free by ordering a Moti Piin, a battery-powered vaping pen, from the company’s online shop.

Or buy sleek cartridges from Smok, another e-cigarette brand, and earn chances to win disposable gloves and up to 10,000 masks.

“COVID19 RELIEF EFFORT” blasts the ad of another online shop offering two-for-one e-liquid vials. Buyers at another shop get 19% off nicotine e-juices if they enter the code COVID-19.
TOBACCO CONTROL: THREATS DURING COVID-19

• Coping with stress during the pandemic
  – Some smokers increased their use of tobacco products
    • Note: TI data shows nearly 40% of smokers in 5 countries increased used
  – A Dutch study found 18.9% of smokers increased their use

• Does nicotine protect against COVID-19? The confusion as a threat
LOCKDOWN BANS AND RESTRICTIONS: DOWNSIDES

- Increase in illicit tobacco trade
- Public outcry (loss of some goodwill)
- Tobacco industry exploiting the ban to gain public sympathy
- Lifting of tobacco ban in Bhutan

Smokers launch own legal battle against tobacco ban

Bhutan has relaxed its tobacco ban to combat the coronavirus pandemic, whose recent worrisome case entered the Himalayan kingdom from across the border. (Photo by Phuntsho Wangdi)

PHUNTSHO WANGDI and NDUP GYELTSHEN, Contributing writers

August 15, 2020 16:45 JET
Tobacco control & COVid-19: Lessons for stakeholders
TOBACCO CONTROL & COVID-19: LESSONS FOR STAKEHOLDERS (GOVERNMENT)

• Highlights the role of tobacco in the burden of NCDs and some infectious diseases

• Highlights the importance of Article 5.3 and the need for measures to ensure its implementation at country-level to address tobacco industry interference

• Highlights the importance of becoming a party to the protocol to eliminate illicit trade in tobacco products

• Governments (esp. in LMICs) need to review their approach to smoking cessation
  – Improved access to smoking cessation aids and programs
  – Holistic approach to addressing the impact of tobacco use on COVID-19 (mostly lacking)
  – Smokers should be provided with the support they need to quit during this period
LESSONS FOR STAKEHOLDERS: TOBACCO CONTROL ADVOCATES AND RESEARCHERS

• Education/awareness is key to getting public support and to maintain public trust - otherwise, the industry fills the void with half-truths and lies to buy the people's sympathy

• Availability of local data and monitoring the impact of the ban or restrictions is important. You do not want to ban for banning sake.

• Precautionary approach is important but clear communication about the reasons for any action and cessation support for smokers would help get public buy-in

• Jobs!!! What can be done to create alternative sources of livelihood for those presently working in the tobacco industry? (farmers, traders)

• More accurate documentation of smoking status data is needed

• Role of the media in tobacco control – critical to recognize and use
THANK YOU IN SEVERAL AFRICAN LANGUAGES

Nigeria: “E se” (Yoruba)
Cameroon: "Merci" (French)
Angola: "Obrigado" (Portuguese)
South Africa: "Ngiyabonga" (Zulu)
Egypt: "Shukran" (Arabic)
Ethiopia: "Amesegënallô" (Amharic)
Kenya: "Asante" (Swahili)
Uganda: "Webale" (Luganda)
Botswana: "Ke a leboga" (Setswana)

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