

capacity and expertise for design and rollout of such campaigns, they can assist the national efforts in reducing tobacco use and acceptance of tobacco control measures by the population. For instance, the superior coverage of mobile networks could be leveraged to deliver tobacco cessation advice directly to people's phones, even in communities that live in remote rural areas. Practical guidance and tools are already available to support design and implementation of such national interventions. In 2015, WHO and ITU co-developed a handbook for implementing mTobaccoCessation programmes.²⁶ The methods described in the handbook were successfully tested in India in 2016. The majority of the 2 million tobacco users registered for the service had made quitting attempts and around 19 percent reported they have stopped smoking.²⁷ WHO also provides app and text message-based support for quitting tobacco.²⁸

4. Ministries of communication can take important first steps to advance tobacco control and accelerate progress towards the SDGs.

Upholding the right to health is a fundamental responsibility of entire governments, not just ministries of health. Ministries of communication help fulfill this responsibility. In the first instance, ministries of communication should:

- Include tobacco control as one of the strategic priorities.
- Get involved in tobacco control coordination and planning across government sectors and with political leaders, including collaborating with the Ministry of Health to develop and adopt a national strategy/ action plan for tobacco prevention communication campaigns.
- Include participation of the national coordinating mechanism (NCM) for WHO FCTC implementation and assign a representative to the NCM.
- Facilitate collaboration with telecom regulators, mobile network operators and mass media content creators and distributors.

In line with the Convention Secretariat's [Global Strategy to Accelerate Tobacco Control 2025](#) and [UNDP's Strategic Plan 2022-2025](#) and [HIV, Health and Development Strategy \(2022-2025\)](#), these briefs emphasise the importance of a coordinated, multisectoral whole-of-government approach to tobacco control, empowering Parties to work across sectors to achieve policy coherence.

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Tobacco Control

What Ministries of Communication Need to Know

Key Points

- 1 Protecting consumers from misleading information is a priority.
- 2 Exposure to tobacco use in movies and TV shows particularly increases the odds of smoking initiation among youth.
- 3 Awareness-raising and anti-tobacco mass communication campaigns are effective in reducing the burden of tobacco.
- 4 Ministries of communication can take important first steps to advance tobacco control and accelerate progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Sustainable Development Goal 3 (SDG 3) aims ‘to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages’.¹ One of the means of achieving this goal is to strengthen implementation of the World Health Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC) in all countries, as appropriate (Target 3.a) Many people worldwide are not fully aware of the risks posed by tobacco or are misled by legacy beliefs or misconceptions cultivated by the tobacco industry. The change of narratives around tobacco through consistent public communication policies can accelerate behaviour change and the reduction of tobacco prevalence.

The WHO FCTC is a legally binding treaty that reaffirms the right to health.² It was developed in response to the tobacco epidemic and currently has 183 Parties, covering more than 90 percent of the global population.³

1. Protecting consumers from misleading information is a priority.

The tobacco industry goes to great lengths to mislead consumers about the negative effects of tobacco. Tobacco companies invest heavily in marketing and promotion of their products, which often involves indirect collaboration with communication service providers. In 2019, the advertising and promotional expenses of the largest cigarette companies in the United States totalled US\$7.6 billion.⁴ Tobacco companies use predatory tactics to target vulnerable populations, including women, girls, ethnic/racial minorities and youth. Tactics include increased marketing directed to vulnerable communities,⁵ tailoring brands or packaging to appeal to women or different socioeconomic groups⁶ and handing out coupons to vulnerable groups.⁷

It is well documented that tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship (TAPS) increases the likelihood of tobacco use,⁸ while comprehensive bans on TAPS reduce consumption.⁹ Protecting consumers from misleading tobacco marketing by the tobacco industry is therefore an important priority. In this context, one of the key tobacco prevention measures mandated by the WHO FCTC is the complete ban on TAPS of all tobacco products (in line with WHO FCTC Article 13 and its guidelines for implementation).¹⁰ This measure can be implemented and enforced at low cost, while helping to avert enormous social and economic losses.

However, despite clear evidence-based arguments in favour of protecting consumers from misleading tobacco information, full implementation of comprehensive bans on TAPS remains challenging. The marketing of tobacco products has grown more sophisticated and diverse, often by using novel communication channels and cunning content delivery strategies. Furthermore, tobacco companies regularly interfere with policymaking and policy implementation as well as with tobacco marketing regulations. It is therefore essential to ensure engagement of communication authorities as well as mass media content creators, managers

and distributors to achieve full implementation of a comprehensive ban on TAPS in line with WHO FCTC Article 13 and its guidelines for implementation.

THE DEADLY CONSEQUENCES OF TOBACCO AND WHY GOVERNMENT SECTORS MUST WORK TOGETHER TO IMPLEMENT THE WHO FCTC

The social, economic and environmental impacts of tobacco consumption and production are staggering. Tobacco kills more than 8 million people each year, with LMICs disproportionately burdened.¹¹ Smoking-attributable diseases cost the global economy over a trillion US dollars annually, due to medical expenses and lost productivity.¹² The environmental impacts, due to plastic pollution, deforestation and soil degradation from tobacco growing, as well as water and soil pollution from pesticide use and cigarette littering, are of growing concern.

Levels of tobacco consumption and production in society are determined largely by policies beyond the health sector. This means that the development consequences of tobacco are largely avoidable through better policy coherence and common strategies that deliver shared gains for all sectors involved, accelerating progress against multiple SDGs.

TOBACCO COMPANIES WORK ACTIVELY TO INFLUENCE NATIONAL TOBACCO MARKETING REGULATIONS

A systematic review published in 2014 identified close to 50 research works that made reference to tobacco industry efforts to influence marketing regulations and tobacco advertising practices.¹³ A range of tactics have been uncovered, including direct and indirect lobbying, shaping of evidence against marketing restrictions (including by commissioning publications and reports), discrediting opponents, establishing collaborations between industry and policymakers, launching sponsorship initiatives, and even taking legal action against governments. For instance, British American Tobacco brought a case against the Ministry of Health in South Africa claiming that the Tobacco Products Control Act, which imposed restrictions on advertising and promotion, violated their freedom of expression and was unconstitutional. In 2012, the Court upheld the ban ruling that the limitation was reasonable and justifiable given South Africa's obligation under the WHO FCTC and due to the public health impacts of tobacco.¹⁴

2. Exposure to tobacco use in movies and TV shows particularly increases the odds of smoking initiation among youth.

Exposure to tobacco use in movies and TV shows particularly increases the odds of smoking initiation among youth.¹⁵ Indeed, a meta-analysis of studies in Germany, Mexico and the United States found that adolescents that were most exposed to smoking in movies were twice as likely to smoke themselves.^{16, 17} According to the Global Youth Tobacco Survey (GYTS) conducted across 25 countries of the WHO European Region, more than half of young people in each country are exposed to tobacco advertisement and promotion on television or in movies or videos.¹⁸

Research suggests that streaming services contain more depictions in comparison to broadcast TV, and the frequency of depictions is steadily increasing. The Truth Initiative analysed popular TV shows among youth on a well-known streaming service and found 92 percent of the shows contained images of tobacco in 2016/17, compared to 79 percent in 2015/16.¹⁹

Tobacco companies have also used social media to promote tobacco consumption, with differing tactics across various platforms, including YouTube, Facebook, WeChat and Weibo.²⁰ The four largest tobacco companies, Phillip Morris International, British American Tobacco, Japan Tobacco International and Imperial Brands, have used social media in more than 40 countries to promote tobacco use, gaining millions of views. Phillip Morris International's "IDECIDETO" campaign using more than 600 influencers and more than 3,000 posts resulted in 47 million views alone.²¹

Adult consumers are supporting stricter tobacco control measures, including reducing favourable depictions of tobacco in media. In India, for example, civil society, together with WHO and the Indian Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, helped drive stricter regulations for the depiction of tobacco in films and television, leading to reduced tobacco imagery on-screen and an increased exposure to tobacco awareness messaging.²²

3. Awareness-raising and anti-tobacco mass communication campaigns are effective in reducing the burden of tobacco.

Raising awareness is an important tool to achieve behavioural change. This is particularly true among population groups that continue to underestimate the damaging effects of tobacco or that have been misled by tobacco propaganda. Indeed, in many countries large segments of the population are still not fully aware of the dangers of tobacco. For example, almost one in five adults in Egypt²³ and one in four adults in Brazil either do not believe or do not know that smoking may cause stroke.²⁴

Mass media campaigns aiming to raise awareness and to encourage tobacco cessation are a cost-effective, evidence-based measure recommended by the WHO FCTC to reduce the damaging impact of tobacco.²⁵ Evidence-based economic analysis conducted by WHO and UNDP in 18 low- and middle-income countries indicates that it would take less than US\$110 million to implement regular mass media anti-tobacco campaigns in these countries over a period of five years, which is less than 1 percent of what these countries lose annually due to tobacco-related illnesses.ⁱ At the same time, the implementation of these campaigns would yield US\$3.5 billion in economic gains over the same period and would save more than 100,000 lives in the next 15 years.

Mass media campaigns should educate the public about the impacts of tobacco use and exposure to secondhand smoke as well as provide basic information and guidance on how people could access cessation support.

Communication authorities and telecom operators have a key facilitating role to play in the implementation of such campaigns. By providing communication channels, network

ⁱ Based on the results of national cases for investment in tobacco prevention and control (FCTC investment cases) jointly conducted by WHO and UNDP in Armenia, Cabo Verde, Cambodia, Chad, Egypt, Eswatini, Jordan, Lao PDR, Madagascar, Mozambique, Myanmar, Samoa, Serbia, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka, Suriname, Tunisia and Zambia. Available at: <https://fctc.who.int/who-fctc/development-assistance/investment-cases>.