The tobacco industry tactics-a challenge for tobacco control in low and middle income countries

*Doku D

University of Tampere, School of Public Health, Finland
African Health Sciences 2010; 10(2): 201 - 203

Tobacco use has fallen over the past decades in many developed countries. However in the developing countries smoking and tobacco use in general is now emerging. This commentary discusses the tactics of the tobacco industry and the challenges for tobacco in middle and low income countries in the 21st century.

Currently, there are over 1.2 billion tobacco users in the world. It is worrying that of this; well over 800 million are living in developing. Out of the total burden of tobacco-related diseases globally, 70% will occur in developing countries by 2030.

Tobacco consumption has fallen over the past 20 years in most high-income countries such as the United States, Australia, Britain, Canada, Finland and most European countries. On the contrary; tobacco use has risen to unprecedented levels in middle and low-income countries, especially in Asia and Africa. Thus, Africa and Asia are the current targets of the tobacco industry. In the pursuit of this agenda, the industry has employed various strategies and tactics including cigarettes smuggling, recruiting of new and young smokers, denying the health consequences of smoking, manipulating governments to delay tobacco control legislations and the sponsoring of health professionals and academic institutions to act in their favour.

The tobacco manufacturers have been reported to be involved in organising smuggling of tobacco products in many developing countries. This is aimed at making tobacco cheap and available on the market in order to outweigh governments’ efforts at controlling tobacco supply and consumption through increase taxation. The harmful effects of tobacco have been well established scores of decades ago, yet the tobacco industry still denies the health consequences of their products. Tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship possess another great challenge to the fight against tobacco control in developing countries. Tobacco advertising influences adolescent smoking. It encourages non-smokers to initiate smoking and existing smokers to increase consumption on one hand.

On the other hand, a ban on advertising, promotion and sponsorship of tobacco product reduces its consumption. Studies have shown that smokers who noticed less tobacco advertising and promotion after the comprehensive ban of advertising in the UK were 1.5 times more likely to quit smoking. Similarly, comprehensive bans in Finland, France, Norway and New Zealand were reported to have reduced the per capita consumption of cigarettes by 14-37%. The WHO estimates that the ban of tobacco advertising and promotion could reduce worldwide demand for tobacco products by 7%. Such policies would contribute immensely to the effort of fighting against the menace in developing countries, especially in sub-Sahara Africa where the epidemic has already started. Therefore a ban on advertising, promotion and sponsorship of tobacco product is a powerful tool in tobacco control.

The health and economic benefits of such restrictions are well known. Besides, there are massive supports of civil society for such actions in many countries. However, being aware of the impact of these restrictions on tobacco consumption, the tobacco industry is fiercely confronting both directly and indirectly tobacco legislations, especially in low and middle income countries. Indeed, many nations (including most low and middle income countries) have embraced the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), the world’s first public health treaty, but there are more challenges in implementing the policies that will counteract the activities of the tobacco industry. For instance, Benin was one of the many 178 states that signed the FCTC but has admitted that the nation lack the power to interfere in the activities of the tobacco industry because of the jobs and revenue that the industry

*Corresponding author:
David Doku
Tampere School of Public Health
University of Tampere, Finland
Telephone: +358401901637
Email: david.doku@uta.fi, daviddoku@ymail.com
for parliamentary nod into legislation. Also, more recently, occasionally, there are flashes of what may be called indirect promotion of tobacco on some popular TV channels in Ghanaian movies. In one of such movies there were scenes of young men smoking in an episode which portrayed smoking as urban lifestyle. In another movie, there were scenes of university girls smoking thus misinforming the public to believe smoking is a “cool” campus life. Such telecasts can be described as tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship as stated in Article 1 of the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) which defines tobacco advertising and promotion as, “any form of commercial communication, recommendation or action with aim, effect or likely effect of promoting a tobacco product or tobacco use either directly or indirectly”; and tobacco sponsorship as, “any form of contribution to an event, activity or individual with the aim, of effect or likely effect of promoting a tobacco product or tobacco use either directly or indirectly”. Certainly, such scenarios on televisions call for concern because the media has a significant role in the fight against tobacco use not only in Ghana but in Africa and in the world at large.

While lauding the demonstration of the political will of many governments both in low and middle income countries in tobacco control through such things as the signing of the FCTC, it is equally incumbent on these countries, especially those in African to work out pragmatic and realistic modus operandi of dealing with the menace in a way that will yield significant and sustainable results. The tobacco industry is seeing a bright market in the developing world, and an alternative to the losing markets the developed world. It has not given up yet. Governmental and non-governmental organizations and tobacco advocacy groups working in low and middle income countries must be constant and innovative in their fight against tobacco. Policy actions are urgently needed in the fight against tobacco use. Increase in tobacco taxation; ban on advertising; promotion and sponsorship; and public education on the health, environmental and economic consequences of tobacco use; and checking tobacco smuggling and surveillance are some of the measures that can nullify the strategies and tactics of the tobacco industry and consequently help control the tobacco epidemic particularly in developing countries and in the world at large.
Acknowledgement
Thanks to Mr. Mohammed Mukhtar and the anonymous reviewers for their comments which improved this paper.

References
5. White A. Cigarette marketing in Senegal, West Africa. Tobacco Control (1997); 6: 243-