

Eliminating the scourge of tobacco for a fairer and healthier world: New Zealand leads the way



The entry into force of the WHO Framework on Tobacco Control (FCTC) in 2005 was expected to herald rapid global progress. The reality is that 87 million people have died from tobacco-induced diseases since the beginning of the FCTC negotiations;¹ this is a greater toll than any other single cause and far outstrips the impact of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Although progress has been made in reducing smoking rates in high-income countries and some middle-income countries,² there has been little impact on the tobacco industry itself, which continues to expand its global presence and profits, and devastation.

The world faces huge development issues ranging from eliminating poverty, to the climate crisis, as recognised in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The challenge is to focus attention on actions that create a fairer and healthier world and, which, in turn, will contribute to many of the SDGs. Reducing and ultimately eliminating the impact of the tobacco industry is clearly a top public health issue, since it is responsible for around 6 million deaths each year, with the potential to kill 1 billion people by the end of the century.

In New Zealand, tobacco causes approximately 15% of deaths each year and is a major driver of unacceptable health inequalities. In 2011, in response to an inquiry into the ravages of tobacco on Maori people, the Government accepted the goal of New Zealand achieving a minimal level of smoking, less than 5% of all adults continuing to smoke daily, by 2025 (Smokefree 2025).³ The goal is world leading and goes much further than the WHO target of a 30% reduction in global prevalence from 22% in 2010, to 15% in 2025.

Since the Smokefree 2025 goal was adopted 5 years ago, the government has put in place important policies: annual tax increases of 10%, a ban on point-of sale displays, smoke-free prisons, and legislation for the standardised packaging of tobacco products. The government-funded national tobacco advocacy service has been shifted to a Maori provider. Political champions and opportunistic political leadership have been key to progress.

Despite the policy progress, New Zealand is not on track to achieve the Smokefree 2025 goal, except for the most privileged 40% of the population who are already

close to reaching the goal. The New Zealand Survey data for 2015–16 estimates that 14% of adults (16% men, 13% women) smoke cigarettes daily.⁴ This is only a small improvement over recent years. Huge socioeconomic and ethnic inequalities remain and a renewed effort is needed to reduce the prevalence in Maori (36%) and Pacific people (23%) and the most disadvantaged groups.

Our engagement in tobacco control prevention spans almost 40 years, from the development of Action on Smoking and Health (ASH) New Zealand, based on the UK model, to involvement setting priority of global goals and targets for the major NCDs and their risk factors.⁵ With less than a decade to go before 2025, re-engaging in the battle against the tobacco industry in New Zealand and Pacific countries,⁶ and reaching a smoke-free country, seems to be the single most achievable public health issue that will contribute to a fairer and healthier society for all New Zealanders in the near future.

So, what would it take to achieve this already agreed upon 2025 goal in New Zealand and how can this experience provide a positive example for other countries? Government policies to reduce demand in New Zealand must continue to be strengthened, especially more substantial tax increases; small increases in taxation are not sufficient because smokers quickly adjust.

The greatest gains in the future will depend on addressing supply-side issues beginning with a greatly reduced availability of tobacco in New Zealand; tobacco products are available from about 8000 retail outlets.⁷ In addition, we require greatly increased funding for targeted mass and social media campaigns, increased smoke-free public places and smoke-free cars carrying children, and complete divestment from tobacco. Electronic nicotine-delivery devices and low-nicotine cigarettes may have a role to play in achieving the 2025 goal by encouraging cessation.

The only tobacco manufacturer in New Zealand is Imperial Tobacco; British American Tobacco (BAT) and Philip Morris import their products, mostly from Australia. An important overarching goal will be to encourage Imperial Tobacco to downsize and leave the country.

Achieving the Smokefree 2025 goal will make New Zealand both a fairer and healthier society, will have major social and economic benefits, and will set an example for the rest of the world.⁸

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We declare no competing interests.

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