

Smoke—free generation or tobacco endgame: How far have we come?

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Abstract

English:

Tobacco-free generation policies and tobacco endgame strategies aim to reduce tobacco use to minimal levels via ambitious, time-bound measures. This article synthesises recent policy directions and implementation across countries. Narrative review of sources cited herein, focusing on WHO FCTC and MPOWER implementation and national endgame initiatives. Countries pursue mixes of product-, user-, market/supply- and institution-oriented measures. Implementation of FCTC and MPOWER remains uneven across Europe, with leadership examples (e.g., Finland's legislative endgame; New Zealand's comprehensive strategy) and persistent challenges (legal constraints, debates on e-cigarettes, tobacco industry interference). Progress is mixed but feasible pathways exist. Continued innovation and political commitment are needed to reach smoke-free generation targets.

Keywords

Smoke Free Generations • Tobacco Endgame

Generația fără tutun sau sfârșitul tutunului: Cât de departe am ajuns?

Rezumat

Romanian:

Politicile privind generațiile fără tutun și strategiile de eliminare a consumului de tutun vizează reducerea consumului de tutun la niveluri minime prin măsuri ambițioase și cu termene-limită clare. Acest articol sintetizează direcțiile recente de politică și modul de implementare în diferite țări. Lucrarea reprezintă o analiză narativă a surselor citate, care se concentrează pe implementarea FCTC OMS și MPOWER, precum și pe inițiativele naționale de eliminare a consumului de tutun. Țările urmăresc combinații de măsuri orientate spre produse, utilizatori, piață/ofertă și instituții. Implementarea FCTC și MPOWER rămâne inegală în Europa, cu exemple de leadership (de exemplu, obiectivul legislativ final al Finlandei și strategia cuprinzătoare a Noii Zeelande) și provocări persistente, precum constrângerile legale, dezbaterile privind țigările electronice și interferența industriei tutunului. Progresul este mixt, dar există căi fezabile. Sunt necesare inovarea continuă și angajamentul politic pentru a atinge obiectivul unei generații fără tutun.

Cuvinte-cheie

generații fără tutun • eliminarea consumului de tutun

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Introduction

Tobacco-free generation (TFG) policies, also referred to as smoke-free or nicotine-free generation in some regions, aim to eliminate tobacco use initiation by preventing sales to individuals born after a specified date (1). On the other hand, there is also debate around the concept of the 'tobacco endgame'. The tobacco endgame goes beyond traditional tobacco control and seeks to ban smoking entirely, thereby ending the tobacco epidemic by strengthening control measures (2). It is defined as reducing tobacco use in the general population to minimal levels—preferably with a measurable goal in a clearly defined time frame (3). There is also a close connection between these two objectives and programmes. The TFG goal, an ambitious plan, was set for EU member states in 2021 as part of Europe's Beating Cancer Plan (4). In practice, this has been defined as reducing tobacco use prevalence to below 5% by 2040 at the EU level. Tobacco endgame strategies worldwide aim to rapidly and permanently reduce tobacco use to minimal levels, effectively ending the epidemic (5). Proposed prevalence targets vary by country, with different percentages being set.

Numerous policies have been identified as having the potential to achieve a tobacco endgame. These have been grouped into four categories: product, user, market/supply and institutional structure-oriented tobacco control measures (6).

Product-focused policies include (2): mandating very low nicotine content for smoked tobacco products to make them non-addictive or less addictive, setting product standards for nicotine products so that combustible tobacco products become unappealing or are removed from the market for exceeding toxicity thresholds, and requiring consumers to obtain a purchaser's licence or medical prescription to buy tobacco.

User-focused policies include: restricting tobacco sales by year of birth (TFG), ending commercial retail sales of combustible tobacco (abolition), setting a regularly decreasing quota on the volume of tobacco products manufactured or imported into a country (the 'sinking lid'), and introducing measures that reduce the commercial viability of tobacco companies, such as a 'corporate death penalty', criminal charges, mandatory compensation for the full impacts of tobacco use, or restrictions on profitability.

Market/supply focused policies involve: raising tobacco taxes to make products unaffordable and imposing restrictions on retailer density, location, type and licensing to substantially reduce tobacco availability.

Institutional structure-focused policies emphasise: transferring management of tobacco supply to an agency mandated to

phase out tobacco sales and implementing performance-based regulation, whereby tobacco companies must meet smoking prevalence targets or face fines, or pay a levy based on sales volume, similar to 'polluter pays' schemes.

Every country has attempted to make progress in this domain, but the steps forward have differed significantly. Finland, for example, has set the ambitious goal of eliminating all nicotine products, including smokeless tobacco and Electronic Nicotine Delivery Systems (7), while New Zealand has focused more narrowly on combustible tobacco products (8). The path towards a smoke-free generation is therefore pursued with varying priorities (2).

Belgium has built its approach on close cooperation between health and social care services, ensuring support for vulnerable groups, while also strengthening educational assistance for quitting in schools, workplaces, healthcare facilities, local government and leisure environments. Finland, in turn, has raised the minimum age for tobacco sales, introduced prevention programmes in sports clubs, and promoted tobacco-free playgrounds and beaches. In France, measures have aimed to reduce the attractiveness and availability of tobacco and nicotine products, with a strong focus on cessation support in vocational schools and the creation of smoke-free zones around the entrances of educational institutions.

Ireland has chosen to concentrate on smoke-free environments in schools and childcare facilities, alongside prohibiting sales at events for those under 18 years of age and conducting national campaigns. The Netherlands has pursued similar objectives by expanding smoke-free environments in schools, zoos and sports clubs, while Sweden has emphasised strict supervision of tobacco and nicotine products together with prevention programmes in schools. Slovenia has also prioritised education through school-based programmes, whereas in the United Kingdom and Scotland, efforts have included raising the legal age of sale and launching widespread marketing campaigns.

Despite these diverse approaches, many questions remain unanswered. Are the objectives still achievable? Have the priorities chosen by each nation been realistic in relation to their own social and political context? And, perhaps most importantly, how does the tobacco industry continue to adapt its strategies, and how effectively are governments and public authorities responding?

When examining the implementation of the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC) and the MPOWER (WHO's six-part policy package: Monitor, Protect, Offer, Warn, Enforce, Raise) measures across the European region, the results reveal how far countries still are from reaching the proposed objectives. Progress has been assessed across six domains—capacity, taxation and price policies, national regulations, public awareness

and communication, cessation support and monitoring (9). Overall, implementation of the FCTC at the country level has ranged from as low as 28% to as high as 86%, while MPOWER implementation has ranged from 31% to 96%. Such uneven application across European countries demonstrates that, after the initial steps, it is essential to pursue further innovative measures if the tobacco endgame goals are to be achieved.

Discussion

The challenges remain substantial. They include legal obstacles, ongoing debates over the role of e-cigarettes, and the tobacco industry's persistent attempts to co-opt the rhetoric of smoke-free policies (10). At the same time, it is worth recognising positive examples. New Zealand has become the first nation in the Asia-Pacific region to adopt a comprehensive national endgame strategy, setting a standard for others to follow (5, 11). Finland also stands out as the first—and still the only—country to enshrine the tobacco endgame into national legislation (12).

Taken together, these examples highlight both achievements and shortcomings. The mixed progress in global tobacco control presents a continuing challenge for the next generations of policymakers, NGOs, public authorities, healthcare professionals, educators, and, not least, young people themselves (13).

At the same time, it is important to draw lessons from positive examples. New Zealand, with its pioneering national endgame strategy in the Asia-Pacific region, has set a benchmark for other countries to follow (5, 11). Finland remains remarkable as the first—and still the only—nation to integrate a tobacco endgame strategy directly into national legislation (12).

Conclusions

Yet, despite such progress, global tobacco control continues to reflect a mixed picture. This uneven advancement underscores the fact that the challenge is far from over. The responsibility now falls to future generations of policymakers, NGOs, public authorities, healthcare professionals, educators and even young people themselves to carry the effort forward and ensure that the vision of a TFG truly becomes a reality.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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