

Going the Last Mile: Reducing Smoking Prevalence in Sri Lanka to Under 10%

The reduction in Sri Lanka's smoking prevalence from 40.5% in 2005 to 28.4% by 2018¹ is impressive. However, tobacco consumption cost the country [Rs. 89 billion](#) in 2015², due to cancers and other non-communicable diseases caused by tobacco. The tobacco related health cost to the country amounted to 6.1% of government revenue in 2015. This is more than the revenue collected from cigarettes and tobacco for the same year - 5.5% of government revenue³. Every year, more than 12,300 Sri Lankans die due to tobacco-related diseases.⁴

Sri Lanka was able to bring down tobacco prevalence in the country by rolling out several key tobacco control policies such as: a) measures to have 80% pictorial warnings on cigarette packs and in 2016; b) increasing the prices of cigarettes; c) prohibition of tobacco-related advertising in mass media; and, d) banning smoking in indoor public spaces. Some of these policies have required significant political willpower to implement, despite pushback from industry lobbyists. Despite these achievements, tobacco prevalence is still causing health issues and disrupting family lives and taking household income away from more productive uses in the country.

Challenge: The Last Mile

While the overall rates of smoking are falling in Sri Lanka, it is still quite high (29.4% among males).⁵ The tobacco prevalence is especially high (31.9%) amongst 40 and above males.⁶ It is also concentrated amongst poorer households⁷ and in Nuwara Eliya, Vavunia, Mullitivu, Mannar, Kilinochchi Districts⁸. Further when considering 15-24 year olds boys, tobacco prevalence is higher amongst non-schooling males⁹.

Reducing the smoking prevalence rate to below 10% will deliver immense public health and economic benefits to Sri Lankans. Special and more targeted measures are needed to reduce tobacco prevalence amongst remaining pockets of smokers. Tobacco industry is working hard to find means of promoting tobacco, given existing policies on educating the population on tobacco related harm and controlling tobacco promotion. A strong political commitment is needed to combat such

¹ Alcohol and Drug Information Centre, Annual Trend Survey on Tobacco Smoking in Sri Lanka Various Issues, ADIC, Colombo

² World Health Organization, (2017), Economic and Social Costs of Tobacco and Alcohol in Sri Lanka 2015. Sri Lanka, World Health Organization

³ Ministry of Finance

⁴ The Tobacco Atlas Country Sri Lanka (2019) <https://tobaccoatlas.org/country/sri-lanka/>

⁵ WHO and Ministry of Health, Nutrition and Indigenous Medicine (2015) Non Communicable Disease Risk Factor Survey, Sri Lanka- STEPS Survey Sri Lanka 2015

⁶ Alcohol and Drug Information Centre (2019), Annual Trend Survey on Tobacco Smoking in Sri Lanka 2018, ADIC, Colombo

⁷ Department of Census and Statistics (2017). Demographic and Health Survey 2016, Department of Census and Statistics, Colombo

⁸ Ministry of Health, Nutrition and Indigenous Medicine (2016), Annual Health Bulletin 2016, Ministry of Health, Nutrition and Indigenous Medicine, Colombo

⁹ Ministry of Health, Nutrition and Indigenous Medicine (2016), Annual Health Bulletin 2016, Ministry of Health, Nutrition and Indigenous Medicine, Colombo

measures by reducing affordability of cigarettes, increasing the awareness of tobacco related harm, strengthening regulation to prevent direct and indirect promotion of tobacco use, and by helping people to quit tobacco addiction.

Policy Changes

The main presidential candidates have recognised smoking as a serious health concern facing Sri Lanka and has pledged to abide by the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC). In achieving this, Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka (IPS) recommends the following policy changes:

- Reducing affordability of tobacco by continuing to increase taxation on tobacco in line with income and price increases
- Strengthening the NATA Act and tackling loopholes in tobacco-related regulations
- Ensuring knowledge of health warning by banning the sale of single stick cigarettes
- Implementing tailor-made programs aimed at helping individuals quit smoking
- Improving access to tobacco related information and tackling misinformation
- Implementing the ban on tobacco cultivation by 2020