

# ALTERNATIVE RESEARCH INITIATIVE NEWSLETTER

May 2023

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# Call for collective efforts for ending combustible smoking in Pakistan

ISLAMABAD: As Pakistan continues to grapple with the endemic of combustible smoking, the country needs to review, debate and adopt the groundbreaking advances in safer nicotine alternatives to achieve smoke free future sooner than later.

“Today more than ever the government needs to take along all stakeholders in planning for and achieving a smoke free Pakistan,” said Arshad Ali Syed, Project Director of Alternative Research Initiative (ARI), on the occasion of World No Tobacco Day (WNTD). This year’s theme for WNTD is “We need food, not tobacco”.

He added that May 21, 2023 marked the 20th anniversary of the WHO’s Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC). “It is high time to see how far we have come in achieving the aim of tobacco control. Unfortunately, we have not come that far.”

Today Pakistan has more than 29 million adults (15 years and above) who are tobacco users. On average a smoker consumes 13 cigarettes a day. Worryingly the implementation of laws and regulations regarding remains weak. At least 30% of smokers have reported buying loose cigarettes. The sale of loose cigarettes is prohibited.

Arshad added that today science is offering solutions that are

helping developed countries set deadlines for completely ending combustible smoking over the next two decades. “Tobacco harm reduction is an important part of these countries’ smoke-free strategies.”

Sweden is set to become the world’s first “smoke-free” country, which is defined as less than 5% of the adult population smoking. Sweden is going to achieve the target 17 years ahead of the European Union’s 2040 target, as smoking prevalence rate has come down to 5.6% from 15% over the past 15 years. Sweden’s groundbreaking strategy includes assisting smokers switch to “less harmful”



alternatives, such as snus, nicotine pouches and vapes. He called upon the government to consult all stakeholders working on tobacco control in Pakistan and review the new safer tobacco alternatives with the intention of sensibly regulating them, instead of rejecting them. This consultation should include adult smokers as the most important stakeholder. “The adult smokers in Pakistan need help in the form of cessation services and proper knowledge and access to safer nicotine products to quit or switch.”

# Tobacco harm reduction and GATS-II in Pakistan

By Arshad Ali Syed

In 2014 Pakistan made public the results of Global Adults Tobacco Survey (GATS), which is a global standard for systematically monitoring adult tobacco use (smoking and smokeless) and tracking key tobacco control indicators. It was termed as the “first nationally representative survey planned to collect data on tobacco use among adults as well as their knowledge and attitudes towards tobacco control measures”.

With the technical assistance of World Health Organization and the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the GATS Pakistan was conducted by Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS) under the coordination of the Ministry of National Health Services, Regulations and Coordination (NHSRC).

According to the first GATS, we came to know that Pakistan had about 23.9 million (19.1%) adult users of tobacco. Of them, 15.6 million adults were smokers while 3.7 million smoke shisha. Smoking was, as it is today, was prevalent among men (31.8%) than women (5.8%). The tobacco use was higher in rural (21.1%) than in urban areas (15.9%). Secondhand smoke turned out to be a major issue. Nearly 70% were exposed secondhand smoke at the workplace 30 days before the survey. Almost half of adults (56.3 million) were exposed to SHS at home at least monthly.

The Ministry of National Health Services, Regulations and Coordination (NHSRC) is planning to conduct the GATS-II in Pakistan. This is a step in the right direction. The scale of tobacco use seems to have increased since the GATS-I in Pakistan. Some estimates say the number of tobacco users has reached 31 million while other estimates put the number at 29 million. In February 2023, the government increased the Federal Excise Duty by 153%. Though reports based on anecdotal evidence say that the increase in the prices of cigarettes have forced smokers to quit smoking, it would be too early to make such a claim. The presence of illicit and duty not paid cigarettes in Pakistan are adding to the confusion regarding the tobacco use and the smoking prevalence.

Internationally, on the other hand, the world is moving ahead with plans and targets to end combustible smoking by 2040. A number of countries, including New Zealand, are working to have a tobacco free generation (TFG). Another critical factor is ensuring a smoke-free world is the tobacco harm

reduction products (THR). In the last five years, Pakistan has also witnessed the use of THR products, mainly e-cigarettes. Though there is a fierce debate regarding the efficacy of THR products in helping the adult smoker in quitting or switching to safer alternatives, these are legally imported and sold in Pakistan. However, it can be said that these THR products are being used in a regulatory vacuum.

Therefore, it is essential that the GATS-II should cover the whole spectrum of tobacco use in Pakistan. Apart from gauging the smoking prevalence, it should also look at the use of THR products, especially in the context of the intention to use them. Is it for a quitting or switching to a safer alternative or is it a merely a fashion statement. Additionally, it should closely examine the users of THR products in order to see if these have helped adult smokers in quitting or switching to safer alternatives or if they have become dual users. At this juncture these are critical questions for Pakistan. Ignoring the THR products would be like ignoring a piece of puzzle to solve the riddle of tobacco control.

It is important that Pakistan comes out of the rejection mode vis-à-vis the THR products. It serves no purpose but forces the smokers to keeping smoking combustible cigarettes.

Presently, the use of THR products is steadily rising despite the fact that the federal and provincial governments, WHO, and the organizations working on tobacco control refusing to recognize the presence of these products or their effectiveness in helping the adult smokers. This would not solve the smoking endemic Pakistan is facing. It is clear from the experiences of the developed countries that tobacco control is not about finding a panacea but a collection of measures which help to reduce smoking prevalence. Nicotine pouches – SNUS – are part of Sweden’s successful tobacco control policy to achieve the status of a tobacco free country. GATS-II provides an opportunity to gauge and know the scale of the problem of smoking along with the range of solutions available. From revisiting the legislation on tobacco control, the role of provincial governments, higher taxes, Pakistan needs to review and debate the role of the THR products reducing the smoking prevalence.

[The author heads Alternative Research Initiative, a research-based consultancy working for ending combustible smoking in Pakistan.](#)

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## Quitting smoking

By Dr. Abdul Hameed Leghari

Tobacco harm reduction means trying to lessen the harm caused by tobacco use without completely stopping the use of tobacco or nicotine. It is recognized that the best outcome is for people to stop using tobacco, but alternative methods to reduce harm are accepted. Harm reduction is not more important than preventing tobacco use or helping people quit, but instead works together with these measures. Harm reduction is considered a human rights issue because it provides a way for smokers to reduce the harm caused by tobacco, regardless of whether they want or are able to quit.

It is also seen as a social justice issue because it can help smokers who experience the greatest health disparities. For example, people who are poor or have lower levels of education tend to smoke more and have a harder time quitting. They also have a higher risk of lung cancer compared to those with higher income and education. Smokers with mental illness also have a similar situation. Providing access to harm-reduction products may be one way to reduce these health disparities.

However, the role of tobacco harm reduction in tobacco

control is controversial. A long time ago, a Former Surgeon General named C. Everett Koop said that we shouldn't only focus on stopping young people from using tobacco, but also help people who already smoke. We need to find a way to help smokers quit using harmful tobacco while using less harmful nicotine delivery systems. But we don't want young people to start using these new products and then start smoking tobacco.

One idea is to make cigarettes and other tobacco products have less nicotine and tar. This would make them less addictive and harmful. The FDA (Food and Drug Administration) wants to create a world where people don't get addicted to cigarettes and can get nicotine from safer sources. If we do this, we could decrease smoking a lot and save millions of lives.

In 2018, the FDA proposed a rule that would make tobacco products have less nicotine. Many studies have shown that reducing nicotine levels in cigarettes by about 95% could be good for public health. In clinical trials, people who smoked cigarettes with very low levels of nicotine smoked fewer cigarettes, were exposed to fewer harmful chemicals, and were less dependent on nicotine. They also tried to quit smoking more often and were more likely to quit compared to those who smoked regular cigarettes.

However, reducing nicotine levels in cigarettes may have some unintended effects. It did not change people's moods or how much they drank or used cannabis. But some smokers may gain weight when they try to quit smoking. To reduce nicotine levels in cigarettes, there should be a deadline by

which all cigarettes should have a certain low amount of nicotine. But if this happens suddenly, many smokers may start using other products with nicotine, like little cigars or e-cigarettes. This wouldn't be good for public health, as smoking alternative products with nicotine is still harmful. To prevent this, if all tobacco products were reduced in nicotine, then smokers would be more likely to use e-cigarettes instead of other harmful products. But it's important to make sure e-cigarettes are regulated so they are safe and not sold on the black market.

A report from the National Academy of Science, Engineering, and Medicine says that using e-cigarettes instead of smoking cigarettes can reduce exposure to harmful substances found in tobacco smoke. However, the long-term effects of using e-cigarettes are still not clear. The report also says that the amount of nicotine and other harmful substances delivered by e-cigarettes depends on the product and how it's used. Youth using e-cigarettes is a big concern. To regulate e-cigarettes, the report suggests looking at factors like toxicity, appeal, addictiveness, packaging, and youth access. The report suggests that more flexible and effective nicotine replacement products should be approved to help people quit smoking. These products should be appealing to smokers and easy to use, including a combination of short and long-acting forms of nicotine replacement and the potential for long-term use for harm reduction.

[https://www.theasianmirror.com/editorspick/39729/is-tobacco-harm-reduction-matter-in-helping-people-quit-combustible-cigarettes/?fbclid=IwAR1KfXyV5b67TD\\_VM0VgW3BA9UV93K2X1MbA6\\_9JEvXtcbSnnQ\\_23eRKQ](https://www.theasianmirror.com/editorspick/39729/is-tobacco-harm-reduction-matter-in-helping-people-quit-combustible-cigarettes/?fbclid=IwAR1KfXyV5b67TD_VM0VgW3BA9UV93K2X1MbA6_9JEvXtcbSnnQ_23eRKQ)

## Malawi farmers to shift to more sustainable livelihoods

NEW YORK: The Foundation for a Smoke-Free World (FSFW) has reinforced its commitment to help farmers in the world's most tobacco dependent country, Malawi, explore and embrace sustainable agriculture alternatives to tobacco farming. With funding from a five-year FSFW grant, construction has begun for the Centre for Agricultural Transformation's (CAT) physical facility at the Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources (LUANAR) campus in the Malawian capital.

The goal of the CAT is to transform Malawian agriculture systems and the lives of Malawian smallholder farmers by giving them access to inclusive innovation in agricultural science and technology through a range of commercialization channels. The CAT has been managing its programs without a central location, establishing CAT smart farms at LUANAR (Bunda and Natural Resources Campus) and Makoka research station where over 10 value chains have been explored that are becoming popular with smallholder farmers, including: groundnuts, soybean, dairy, mushrooms, and bananas. The new physical hub will be a centre of excellence that will build upon this work with support from FSFW's affiliate, the Agricultural Transformation Initiative (ATI).

"Tobacco farmers and the land on which tobacco is grown are often overlooked in the conversation about ending smoking. The global decline in tobacco demand is bringing negative economic consequences to tobacco farmers. They must be supported to find competitive and sustainable alternative livelihoods.

"That is where the CAT's approach and activities come in, providing much-needed support to farmers, agribusinesses, communities and other stakeholders working to build long-term resilience by diversifying away from tobacco production."

Malawi is one of the largest tobacco-producing countries in the world. Tobacco accounts for more than 60% of the country's foreign exchange earnings and 13% of the economy, as measured by the gross domestic product. Between 2016 and 2021, tobacco exports in real terms dropped by 42%, according to the World Bank.

Mwatitha Braynati, a groundnuts Malawian farmer since 2020, said: "Before the CAT came to partner with us my groundnut harvest totaled just 30 bags. Two years later, in 2022, from the same 1 hectare of land, my harvest increased to 120 bags with technical guidance from the CAT. Next year I expect it to increase to 150 bags by applying the new practices and technologies demonstrated through the CAT smart farms.

"The proceeds from the sale of this harvest have ensured my family of 7 children and 4 grandchildren is happy and does not lack for a good variety of food at home."

### About the Centre for Agricultural Transformation (CAT)

The Centre for Agricultural Transformation (CAT) is a science, technology, and business incubation project that promotes the charitable mission of supporting smallholder Malawian farmers in making economically viable, data-driven decisions for diversifying their incomes and ridding them of their dependence on tobacco farming. Launched in 2019, the CAT is supported by a grant from the Foundation for a Smoke-Free World, with general assistance from the Foundation's affiliate, the Agricultural Transformation Initiative.

<https://www.smokefreeworld.org/newsroom/centre-for-excellence-hub-to-help-worlds-most-tobacco-dependent-farmers-transition-to-more-sustainable-livelihoods/>

# Quit like Sweden to save millions of smokers' lives

Leading international public health experts have urged South African lawmakers to follow the pioneering example of 'Smoke-Free Sweden' to save the lives of millions of smokers. The experts convened a seminar in Johannesburg to report how Sweden is on course to drop below a 5% tobacco smoking prevalence in the next few months. This is the level at which a country is considered officially smoke-free.

No other member of the European Union is close to matching this achievement and none is even on track to do so by the EU's target of 2040, in 17 years' time.

South Africa lags even further behind with a smoking rate approximately five times higher than Sweden's, the seminar was told.



"Sweden's success story should be celebrated as a public health revolution," said Dr. Delon Human, secretary-general of the African Harm Reduction Alliance (AHRA). "We should all be on the mountaintop shouting 'Victory!', and looking at Sweden as the best-case practice.

"It's all about saving lives and about the quality of life for smokers who've been unable to quit. Harm reduction is their way out, it's their fire escape."

Sweden's innovative strategy to minimize the harmful effects of tobacco smoking and save lives is detailed in a new report entitled the Swedish Experience: A roadmap for a smoke-free society, which was co-authored by Dr Human and presented at the seminar.

According to the report, Sweden's approach, which combines tobacco control methods with harm minimization strategies, could save 3.5 million lives in the next decade if other EU countries adopt similar measures.

However, delegates heard that the tobacco control bill currently before Parliament in South Africa could jeopardize hopes of the country becoming similarly smoke-free any

time soon.

Dr. Derek Yach, global health consultant who was president and founder of the Foundation for a Smoke-Free World, warned against proposals in the bill that would regulate harm-reduction products, such as e-cigarettes and nicotine pouches, the same as combustible cigarettes.

"Standing back and going along with equalization of the harm reduction category versus the combustible category will set us back," he said. "A review in a few years' time will show that we've actually forgone the opportunity to save many, many lives.

"But if we were able to accelerate action on harm reduction, we could prevent up to 500,000 tobacco-related deaths in South Africa before 2060."

## Combination of tobacco control with harm minimization

The Swedish model combines recommendations in the WHO Framework Convention for Tobacco Control (FCTC), including reducing the supply and demand of tobacco and banning smoking in certain places, but it adds an important element: accepting that smoke-free products – such as vapes and oral pouches – are less harmful alternatives to traditional cigarettes.

"For adult smokers, switching to non-combustible alternatives is highly recommended," said AHRA president Dr Kgosi Letlape. "Where governments have allowed these alternatives into their environment, the use of combustibles has come down and health benefits have been derived.

"What should not be allowed is for people to continue lying that non-combustibles have no health benefits for adult smokers."

## Public health benefits for individuals and society

The benefits of Sweden's strategy are remarkable. The country's smoking rates just 15 years ago were more than 150% higher than they are today. It now has the lowest percentage of tobacco-related diseases in the EU and a 41% lower incidence of cancer than other European countries.

"We need to be spreading the truths that are evident from these statistics," said Dr. Anders Milton, who also authored the report.

"Some people do need the kick that nicotine gives. Harm reduction products are giving that without the danger to their health."

<https://www.tobaccoharmreduction.net/en/article/quit-like-sweden-to-save-millions-of-smokers-lives-experts-urge-sa-lawmakers>

Established in 2018, ARI is an initiative aimed at filling gaps in research and advocacy on ending combustible smoking in a generation. Supported by the Foundation for A Smoke-Free World (FSFW), ARI established the Pakistan Alliance for Nicotine and Tobacco Harm Reduction (PANTHR) in 2019 to promote innovative solutions for smoking cessation.

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