

# Allying tobacco control with human rights: invited commentary

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## ABSTRACT

The recognition that tobacco control and human rights concerns overlap is quite recent. This commentary reflects upon tobacco control's growth through allying with other domains, and details a particular effort to build alliances between tobacco control and human rights practitioners.

The history and growth of the tobacco control movement involves repeated border crossings into other fields and transformations of self-image. In the 1980s we tended to see ourselves as largely involved in non-smokers' rights, with organisational names such as Americans for Non-smokers Rights, Non-smokers Rights Association (of Canada) and Group Against Smoking (or even 'Smokers') Pollution. There were organisations with broader titles and missions such as 'Action on Smoking and Health', but it wasn't until the end of the decade that we had redefined the movement as 'tobacco control'.<sup>1</sup> Even then, most of us knew little or nothing about 'public health', but we soon found ourselves gathering regularly at American Public Health Association meetings.<sup>2</sup> We knew nicotine was addictive long before 1988, when the Surgeon General's Report on Nicotine Addiction placed cigarettes in the spectrum of addictive drugs,<sup>3</sup> leaving many of us to recast our professional identities as members of the Society of Research on Nicotine and Tobacco. And

environmentalism didn't seem to have much to do with tobacco control until the 1992 report on Environmental Tobacco Smoke by the US Environmental Protection Agency made the connection clear.<sup>4</sup>

And so it is with human rights. Just 10 years ago there were barely any discussions of human rights in tobacco control circles or of tobacco control in human rights circles.<sup>5 6</sup> More recently, human rights campaigners have begun to see how they can benefit from tobacco control knowledge and insights, and tobacco control advocates have begun to appreciate how useful human rights vocabulary and the established treaty bodies can be to our efforts.

Expressing tobacco control concerns in human rights terms invokes a universally accepted moral framework. Reaching out to women's and children's rights and other civil society organisations can broaden the existing national coalitions seeking strong and effective tobacco control measures. Human rights advocates can become engaged in tobacco control advocacy, pressing for full implementation of the FCTC within their countries, once they understand that the provisions of the FCTC specify the human right to health in the context of tobacco control.

One effort to bridge the tobacco control and human rights paradigms and communities has been led by the Public Health Advocacy Institute (PHAI) at the Northeastern University School of Law. PHAI has, thus far, organised in-country meetings,

**Table 1** List of meetings

Date	State	Stakeholders
June 2006	Nepal	Public health and women's rights NGOs
August 2006	Philippines	Legislators and lawyers
January 2007	China	Children's rights NGO
April 2007	Vietnam	Women's rights NGO
July 2007	Bangladesh	Women's Lawyers Association
August 2007	Georgia	Tobacco control NGO; civil society NGO
November 2007	Indonesia	Consumer Law Association and various women's rights NGOs
September 2008	Mexico	Several legislators and human rights organisations
April 2008	Cambodia	Women's rights NGOs; legislators
August 2008	Malaysia	Human rights lawyers
November 2009	Russia	Academic political reformers; public health NGO
December 2009	Egypt	Government Ministry and agencies
June 2010	India	Reform-oriented lawyers
August 2010	Turkey	Civil society NGO
November 2010	Argentina	Legislators; NGOs
March 2011	South Africa	Public Health School; NGOs
January 2011	Kenya	Law reform and public health NGOs
July 2011	Romania	Women's rights NGOs
July 2011	Bulgaria	Women's rights NGO and Government officials
December 2011	Morocco	Women's rights and public health NGOs

NGO, non-governmental organisation.

## What this paper adds

- ▶ This is the first discussion, however brief, of the process by which tobacco control advocates have broadened and deepened the movement by recognising and building upon the overlaps with other movements.
- ▶ It is also the first description of a pioneering effort to develop links between public health and human rights practitioners.

symposia and roundtables in 20 countries that brought health ministry and other relevant officials together with leading national tobacco control advocates and women's rights and children's rights advocates for the first time. These meetings of the movements have helped all participants reconceptualise women's and children's rights to life and health to include the tobacco control agenda. They are listed in table 1. PHAI also met with members of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and Convention on the Rights of the Child treaty bodies to help sensitise them to the impact of tobacco on women and children.

Yet to be explored is the opportunity to work with the international disability rights community under the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Through these sorts of efforts, these potential allies can come to understand how the

disabled face discrimination resulting from policies permitting smoking in the workplace and beyond.<sup>7</sup>

The outcomes of these promising meetings between movements and the long-term impact each may have on the other have yet to be determined. Building on these events and developing follow-up interventions is work that remains to be performed and will require resources, as have prior phases in the development and broadening of our movement.

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## Corrections

**Moodie C, Mackintosh AM, Hastings G, et al.** Young adult smokers' perceptions of plain packaging: a pilot naturalistic study. *Tob Control* 2011;**20**:367–73. doi:10.1136/tc.2011.042911.

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