Systems perspective for equitable tobacco control in the future

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Tobacco control has made undoubted progress in the past decades, including wider implementation of tobacco control policies such as smoke-free legislation, health warning labels and advertising bans.¹ Although these have contributed to a worldwide decrease in smoking prevalence,^{1,2} the number of smokers is still increasing.² Moreover, there are still large socio-economic inequalities in smoking in many world regions.^{3–6} Smoking is a persisting problem that has no simple solution.

For the future of tobacco control I am inspired by scholars such as Professor Marmot⁷ and Professor Meadows,⁸ and those building on their and similar theories,^{9–11} who point out that there are complex societal mechanisms underlying smoking, and that such complex problems should be approached from a systems perspective. This means that smoking should be considered a problem that emerges from a complex global system and can only be solved with approach that fundamentally changes this system. I discuss two examples of problems in tobacco control that I believe will benefit from a systems approach.

Tobacco cannot be regarded a solitary problem, separate from other societal problems. Smoking is increasingly concentrating in disadvantaged groups. Disadvantage drives smoking uptake, for example, through the intersection of smoker and class identities,¹² and makes quitting more difficult, for example, due to chronic life-stressors.¹³ In turn, tobacco expenditure exacerbates poverty in low-income households,¹⁴ further reducing budgets for healthy foods and sport participation. Disadvantage, obesity and smoking are in part a result of the same system. Tobacco control therefore needs structural policies to ensure basic necessities such as housing, employment, a safe childhood and high-quality education for every person.

Smoking is the result of a global system, not just systems within countries. Many high-income countries have set goals to reach a smoke-free generation by a fixed date in the coming decades.¹⁵ New Zealand's Smokefree Aotearoa 2025 Action Plan¹⁶ is a prime example of how these goals may be achieved, and I expect more countries will follow their lead. However, a consequence of increasingly strong policies in high-income countries is a shift in the tobacco industry's activities towards middle-income countries.^{17,18} Fighting the tobacco industry globally, without taking a neo-colonialist/hegemonic approach, will be an important challenge for the coming years.

As a tobacco control researcher, I am motivated to contribute to these and other, smaller challenges for the future, in which I think an understanding of the system that drives smoking will be helpful.

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