

Tobacco control and the climate emergency

Ruth E Malone 

In November 2021, *Tobacco Control* joined more than 200 health journals in urging governments to take immediate action to halt the destruction of the natural world caused by fossil fuel dependency. The climate crisis we face means that 'governments must make fundamental changes to how our societies and economies are organised and how we live'.¹ In February 2022, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released its latest report² and its findings (rated by confidence that the science is solid to conclude each) are deeply disturbing. Every adult human being should read the report's summary for policymakers, including these conclusions:

Climate change has caused substantial damages, and increasingly irreversible losses, in terrestrial, freshwater and coastal and open ocean marine ecosystems (high confidence). The extent and magnitude of climate change impacts are larger than estimated in previous assessments (high confidence). Widespread deterioration of ecosystem structure and function, resilience and natural adaptive capacity, as well as shifts in seasonal timing have occurred due to climate change (high confidence), with adverse socioeconomic consequences (high confidence). Approximately half of the species assessed globally have shifted polewards or, on land, also to higher elevations (very high confidence). Hundreds of local losses of species have been driven by increases in the magnitude of heat extremes (high confidence), as well as mass mortality events on land and in the ocean (very high confidence) and loss of kelp forests (high confidence).

Climate change has adversely affected physical health of people globally (very high confidence) and mental health of people in the assessed regions (very high confidence). Climate change impacts on health are mediated through natural and human systems, including economic and social conditions and disruptions (high confidence). In all regions extreme heat events have resulted in human mortality

and morbidity (very high confidence). The occurrence of climate-related food-borne and water-borne diseases has increased (very high confidence). The incidence of vector-borne diseases has increased from range expansion and/or increased reproduction of disease vectors (high confidence).

The magnitude and rate of climate change and associated risks depend strongly on near-term mitigation and adaptation actions, and projected adverse impacts and related losses and damages escalate with every increment of global warming (very high confidence).

What does all this have to do with tobacco and particularly with cigarettes, the single most deadly consumer product in history? What does all this have to do with the work of tobacco control?

First, like the impacts of climate change, the catastrophic impacts of cigarettes are already upon us and widely seen. No other industrially produced and widely marketed product has caused such enormous numbers of deaths—over 100 million in the last century alone.

Second, even aside the harms tobacco causes to human beings through production, product use and secondhand smoke exposure, its impacts on the environment, throughout all phases of the life cycle of industrial production, are massive and far reaching, constituting a threat to human development and environmental sustainability.^{3,4} Deforestation for tobacco growing and curing, pesticide pollution during tobacco growing, fossil fuels used in manufacturing and transporting defective and deadly products, and unfathomable quantities of toxic waste from tobacco products are among them. For this reason, as the cover of this issue illustrates, the theme for this year's World No-Tobacco Day is 'Tobacco: Threat to our environment'.⁵

While the egregious history of the tobacco industry's influence on science has been widely documented,^{6–9} we are increasingly discovering that the fossil fuel industry engaged in the same immoral conduct, literally risking the survival of the planet to protect its own profits. Fossil fuel companies knew decades ago about the greenhouse gas effect, and used the same tactics of denial, distraction, delay, distortion and misinformation to keep creating

confusion about the role its products played in creating the climate catastrophe, even relying on some of the same public relations firms and scientific consultants tobacco companies employed.^{10–12}

And yet, despite knowing all this, in both cases there seems to be a bewildering lack of urgency among too many policymakers who are in positions to do something. As with the climate crisis, which some continue to hope is really exaggerated and solvable with new technology or incremental extensions of measures already in use, many in public health continue to assume that the tobacco pandemic can be addressed through existing measures. Unfortunately, in each case, there are also those who benefit from existing arrangements and have the political and economic influence to thwart effective changes.

But in neither case can terrible damage to humans and the environment be averted without fundamentally challenging the structural, political and social dynamics that created and sustain the respective causes: emissions from fossil fuels and production and sales of deadly, addictive products. No one should be under the illusion that this will just logically take place because it should. Power relations must shift in order for this to happen. New leaders must emerge who will be less beholden to the status quo. And every one of us must ask ourselves what our own contribution will be, right now.

Readers who follow my personal account on Twitter (@MaloneRuth) know that over the past couple of years I have started riding an e-bike as my primary form of transportation. As a result, I have quickly become an activist for safer streets and separated or protected bike-ways because from outside a car, cars look different: I now see them as polluting, intrusively large and dangerous risks to soft human bodies, ruining public spaces. This has made me start thinking about the similarities between the change in how I now see cars and the change in how smoking is mostly regarded after years of advocacy for smoke-free spaces. The climate crisis requires us to make a similar transformation in our thinking, but scientists tell us we must do this very quickly.

How quickly? According to the IPCC report:

The cumulative scientific evidence is unequivocal: Climate change is a threat to human well-being and planetary health. Any further delay in concerted anticipatory global action on adaptation and mitigation will miss a brief and rapidly closing window of opportunity to secure a liveable and

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sustainable future for all (very high confidence).

Each one of us needs to ask ourselves: how and what can I change? What can I contribute to mitigation and adaptation?

We can combine our tobacco control work with environmental work, raising consciousness about tobacco's environmental effects.¹³ We can work to counter the tobacco industry's 'greenwashing' efforts, and harness the environmental awareness of young people to call out the waste and disutility of industrial tobacco at all stages. We can call for measures to phase out the sale of the most deadly products and those producing the most toxic waste.

But while we must pressure our leaders for policy changes with teeth to address both tobacco and fossil fuel dependence, we need to 'be the change' at local levels as well, changing our own taken-for-granted assumptions. For example, some of us are just relishing our first face-to-face meetings with colleagues, and human contact is important. But should we attend fewer conferences? Can we sometimes use trains to attend them instead of relying on air travel? Can we eat less meat, use cars less frequently, advocate for better active transportation networks and change our buying patterns to reduce consumption of goods that are shipped long distances using fossil fuels? What can be done to denormalise use of cars as the default transportation mode? Each of us needs—right

now—to think about our own contribution to address the climate crisis. There is no time to waste. We welcome your thoughts on what else the global tobacco control community should be doing.

Twitter Ruth E Malone @MaloneRuth

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