

# The Global Tobacco War



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Michael Smith

[Photo: Cigarette advertisement in Eastern Europe.]

- *Every year, about 3 million people around the world die from tobacco-related illnesses and the World Health Organization predicts that if current trends continue, the death toll will rise to 10 million a year by 2025 — including 7 million in the South.*
- *The World Bank estimates that, when its costs and benefits are tallied, tobacco represents a net loss to the global economy of US\$200 billion a year.*
- *In some countries, tobacco competes directly with food for a share of the family income. And tobacco production uses agricultural land that could otherwise grow enough to feed millions of people.*

As the above examples illustrate, the "tobacco war" is a global war with enormous social costs, argues Canadian anti-smoking activist [Rob Cunningham](#).

"In Canada, we've had some success" in reducing smoking, Cunningham told a recent public meeting in Toronto hosted by the [Canadian Science Writers' Association](#). From 1982 to 1992, tobacco consumption dropped by 40%. But despite progress in Canada and in other developed nations, global tobacco consumption is showing no signs of decline, he added. Between 1950 and 1994, world cigarette sales climbed steadily from under two trillion to over five trillion — mainly due to an increase in consumption in the South.

## Increased tobacco consumption

This increase is fuelled by growing populations, higher disposable incomes, and intensive marketing by international tobacco companies, said Cunningham, a senior policy analyst for the [Canadian Cancer Society](#) and the author of [Smoke & Mirrors: The Canadian Tobacco War](#), published by the International Development Research Centre in 1996.

To illustrate his point, Cunningham displayed a selection of cigarette advertisements from the South. One ad declared: "Smoke International Embassy and you've got the whole world in your hands." The text was coupled with scenes from glamorous spots around the world. Another ad offered to admit young people to a rock concert in return for four empty cigarette packages. In Taiwan, one brand of cigarettes is called "Long Life."

### **Creative marketing**

In Canada, when tobacco ads were banned, cigarette-makers still found ways to keep their products in the public eye. The main route was by sponsoring entertainment such as music festivals and sporting events. In France, which also banned cigarette advertising, tobacco companies avoided the rules by advertising lighters and matches that bore the logo and colours of well-known brands. Tobacco companies "are innovative. They are creative. They have led new developments in marketing throughout this century. And they are not giving up," he said.

Moreover, they have enormous resources. "The tobacco companies are global and their annual revenues amount to more than CA\$185 billion — greater than the gross domestic product of 180 of the world's 205 countries," noted Cunningham. "That's a lot of economic clout."

### **Limited opposition**

The opposition, by contrast, is very limited. "The majority of countries do not have an anti-tobacco strategy. They do not even have a full-time person working on tobacco control." In many Asian countries, multinational tobacco companies have waged a "modern-day Opium War," forcing their way into markets that were previously closed and taking them over.

But the South is not helpless, stressed Cunningham. Thailand has successfully resisted the tactics of the tobacco giants with a combination of high taxes, mandatory package warnings, restrictions on smoking, and a ban on advertising. These barriers were challenged by the United States but the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade upheld them, he said. As a result, only 3 per cent of the cigarettes sold in Thailand are made by the international tobacco giants, and Thailand's anti-smoking policy remains firmly in place.

### **Eastern Europe**

Another battle ground is Eastern Europe, where political changes have meant fertile fields for the tobacco giants. "When the Iron Curtain fell, suddenly a huge market was open" — a market in which 700 billion cigarettes are sold every year, said Cunningham. The tobacco companies responded aggressively. Today, the Marlboro man poses with his horse above the streets of Warsaw while the Statue of Liberty sells cigarettes in Prague. In Bucharest, amber traffic lights have the word 'Camel' inscribed on them.

Although lacking the financial might of the tobacco giants, some international organizations are fighting back. For example, IDRC was the first international development agency to put tobacco control research in the South on its agenda. The [International Tobacco Initiative \(ITI\)](#), a multi-donor Secretariat housed at IDRC, hopes to make tobacco control a higher public policy priority in Southern countries through research, capacity building, networking, and information dissemination. ITI funds multi-disciplinary research on the health, economic, social, and environmental dimensions of tobacco control.

## Key agencies

Other key agencies include the [World Health Organization](#), the [International Union Against Cancer](#), and the International Agency on Tobacco and Health. According to Cunningham, the Internet and other communication technologies such as the fax machine are "a tremendous asset. You can now disseminate information with a rapidity that was previously unheard of."

The war against tobacco will go on for a long time, against an opponent that's well entrenched. But "it's a war that can be won, that must be won, that will be won," he concluded.

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Sidebar: [Rob Cunningham on: The Tobacco Industry's 'Survival Strategy'](#)

[Lessons from Canada's Tobacco War](#), by Lauren Walker

[Smoke & Mirrors: The Canadian Tobacco War](#), by Rob Cunningham