

Case Study: Colombia's La Liga successfully lobbies for higher tobacco taxes

At the end of 2016, Colombia's parliament agreed to increase tobacco taxes for the next three years, potentially increasing the supermarket price of a typical packet of cigarettes from 2900 Colombian Pesos in 2016 to 4850 Pesos in 2019. As part of the plan, tax increases in subsequent years will correspond to the prevailing rate of inflation plus an additional 4 percent. This will help to keep the affordability of cigarettes down. Civil society advocacy helped to deliver this success, with La Liga Colombiana Contra El Cáncer (The Colombian League Against Cancer) playing a key role. La Liga's President, Olga Santamaria de Fernández and Scientific Director Dr. Carlos José Castro share their experience.

La Liga Colombiana Contra El Cáncer (La Liga) is one of the oldest and most respected civil society organizations in Colombia. Its philosophy is to fight cancer by all means possible, including the promotion of socially and economically beneficial cancer prevention strategies like tobacco control.

Dr. Castro says: "My duty as a cancer specialist is to do all I can to reduce the prevalence and harm of this disease. No health system can afford the increasing burden of cancer, so prevention strategies are critical. Engaging with government is essential to deliver population-level impact, as legislation can be a powerful driver for behaviour change that reduces preventable cancers. In my opinion, it's the responsibility of every cancer organization to advocate for tobacco control." Smoking prevalence among adults in Colombia has started to decrease thanks to policies like mass media campaigns warning of tobacco harms, but alarmingly, prevalence has increased among adolescents – even though it's illegal to sell tobacco to minors. As a result, there are more young (18-34 years) smokers than older smokers today in Colombia, which projects growing tobacco consumption in the near future.

Tobacco is also a socioeconomic issue: a 2013 study found that 62 percent of Colombian smokers are found in the lower income groups, and are particularly concentrated in those with the lowest incomes and levels of well-being. The socio-economic inequality in tobacco use translates into

health inequity and loss of social welfare.

The team at La Liga knew from published reports and papers that countries like Australia and the United Kingdom had successfully used high taxes to help reduce smoking and deter youth from starting to smoke. Together with other partners in the broad civil society coalition, the Veeduría Ciudadana Control del Tabaco, they concluded that Colombia needed a similar policy.

Tobacco industry tactics had prevented tax increases. Health advocates like La Liga have pushed for higher tobacco taxes since Colombia ratified the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) in 2008, but the

La Liga's Tips for Success

- **Advocacy for tobacco taxes is a key cancer prevention tool – see it as part of your mission**
- **Be outspoken and use scientific evidence to make your case**
- **You don't have to be a tax expert. Partner with the people in-country who have that expertise, or reach out to organizations like American Cancer Society, Cancer Research UK and UICC for knowledge and advice**
- **Look at your network in-country – who would be interested in sharing the load? Reach out to them**
- **It is hard to fight the tobacco industry, its misinformation and political influence, but persistence pays off. Keep fighting. Truth is on our side**

tobacco industry's influence has been a major barrier to progress. They are formidable opponents. The industry encourages politicians to believe that Colombia is a special case where global evidence does not apply. It argues that high tobacco taxes won't reduce smoking and will be especially detrimental to the economy of Colombia due to its particular circumstances. It makes the same "special case" argument in many other countries where it is fighting tax increases. In contrast, global evidence suggests that tax-induced price increases can reduce tobacco consumption.

The industry also inflates claims around illicit trade to derail tax increases. When increases look inevitable, it claims that it supports taxes but says they should be introduced gradually. By 2016, Colombia still had among the lowest levels of tobacco taxes and prices in South America.

The industry also works with the government to increase Colombia's tobacco growing areas, putting the Ministries of Agriculture, Trade and Commerce at odds with the Ministry of Health (MoH) and Colombia's commitments under the FCTC. Tobacco companies donate to multiple political parties, have financed local electoral campaigns, and even use a 1990's settlement related to tobacco smuggling to exert influence at the regional level. Former Ministers of Health and the former Director of Research of Colombia's central bank now work for the industry. It has allies at every level of political life, and is able to evade real scrutiny. For example, there is no independent analysis of how many cigarettes are produced in Colombia, or exported for sale, or how much the industry is currently evading in taxes – because the industry controls the

recording systems.

Partnering to drive change

Combined, concerted effort from the Veeduría Ciudadana Control del Tabaco has been essential to challenge the tobacco industry's influence.

Ms. de Fernández explains: "La Liga is the largest partner in the coalition with the greatest reach and highest profile, widely respected across Colombia as an expert and trusted

voice, and plays a leading role.

In addition to bringing our own expertise, we reached out to international partners like WHO, PAHO, American Cancer Society and others for support and advice.

Another key partner in the coalition's work on tobacco taxes is Anáas Foundation – a Colombian think tank of economists and public health experts who brought highly technical expertise and analysis to tobacco tax policy. Critically, all our partners in Veeduría Ciudadana Control del Tabaco have collaborated strategically to support

tobacco taxes and build a clear, credible and compelling case for the public, media and government."

La Liga's media relations have been central to its advocacy strategy. When its experts speak, their credibility means that the media and its readers listen – building public understanding and support for tobacco taxes. La Liga has been outspoken about the tobacco industry's behaviour and argued strongly for tobacco control and high tobacco taxes to protect Colombia's youth. La Liga also successfully used its brand recognition and trust to support street surveys to estimate the true size of Colombia's illicit tobacco trade. The results of this research, led by Anaás Foundation, helped to

Ms. de Fernández states: *"The tobacco industry is targeting our countries to increase tobacco use, harming our people, for the sake of their profits. No health system, with limited resources, can afford the burden of tobacco-related diseases. Most of the people in our countries cannot afford treatment. Prevention, in the form of high tobacco taxes, is critical. Cancer organizations across Asia, Europe, the Eastern Mediterranean, Africa and Latin America should join the Prevent 20 initiative."*

support the case for tobacco taxes by rebutting the tobacco industry's arguments.

Building the confidence of partners, influencers (including journalists) and other stakeholders has also been critical so they too could understand tobacco taxation and feel comfortable talking about or reporting on the topic. These stakeholders have been invited to workshops on tobacco economics for non-economists, run by Anáas Foundation. In public debates and discussions, La Liga and its partners have been careful to avoid using technical economic terms and instead use examples to illustrate their case, to make the arguments as easy as possible to understand. This has helped to deliver real change in understanding and perceptions among all audiences.

Building government relations

Cultivating government relationships was a priority, to work towards legislative change.

Dr. Castro notes: "La Liga built upon our existing, good relationships with government –and the MoH in particular– based on decades of work to fight cancer and collaborative projects like helping MoH to promote Colombia's smoke-free laws."

Anáas Foundation's Blanca Llorente had also been engaged with the government on health economics research and used her networks to build an informal exchange on tobacco taxation. Careful nurturing of this relationship has led to MoH calling on Anáas Foundation to provide expert analysis on specific aspects of tobacco control.

Internal government changes also helped. In 2011, MoH hired economists for the first time, to work on a long term national public health plan. The efforts of La Liga and its partners were rewarded with the inclusion of tobacco control and the need to combat non-communicable diseases (NCDs) in the plan, alongside traditional areas of focus such as communicable

disease. The alliance also benefited from the appointment of a Minister of Health who is a technical economist, able to understand the complexity of the economic and scientific evidence. His evaluation of the evidence led him to support increasing tobacco taxes and the issues of NCDs, tobacco use, and tobacco taxation as a prevention strategy moved up the agenda at MoH.

There also has been outreach to Congress as a whole. Dr. Castro and his colleagues consistently highlight the scientific and economic evidence in ways that resonate and are understandable. They have also sought to rebut tobacco industry arguments. For example, La Liga and Anáas Foundation developed an infographic on tobacco taxes that was distributed to every member of Congress. They showed that tobacco-related disease is costing Colombia eight times more than its tax receipts and that other cities and countries in the Americas have successfully increased tobacco taxes, including Mexico, Uruguay and Argentina. Based upon La Liga's recommendations, representatives from American Cancer Society and from Uruguay, among others, have presented expert testimony on tobacco taxation to Congress.

The partners increased awareness of the fact that tobacco is a leading cause of preventable illness and death, and that Colombia's health system cannot support that health and financial burden - particularly in the context of needing to meet other health objectives. La Liga has encouraged politicians to increase tobacco taxes to help pay for prevention strategies and better access to health care. Critically, La Liga and its partners were well-positioned to respond to the 2016 tax reform initiative, designed to address the country's revenue shortfall.

Ms. de Fernández says: "Colombia's tax reform initiative presented us with a fantastic opportunity. The government

A recent WHO-ACS study shows that global healthcare expenditure due to smoking-attributable diseases amounted to US\$422 billion in 2012, accounting for 5.7% of global health expenditure.

was open to hearing about how it could increase revenues, and we could point to the fact that tobacco taxes are an internationally recommended source of domestic financing. By accelerating our outreach to the public, media and politicians, we and other partners helped to ensure that tobacco taxes stayed on the agenda and were included in the reforms.”

The partners have found it more difficult to engage with the Ministry of Finance – but are continuing outreach activities and have established links with the customs agency and police unit in charge of customs to bring new stakeholders into the conversation.

Partnering for Success

By partnering with other organizations, La Liga has been able to build upon its own strengths to deliver positive change. More people – especially politicians in Colombia’s Congress – now understand and support higher tobacco taxes and Colombia’s parliament voted at the end of 2016 to increase tobacco taxes on an annual basis.

This is a success, but it’s not the end of the story.

The industry will fight against these increases, so La Liga and others are prepared to provide the right information to the right people at the right time to ensure implementation. In addition, higher increases would have had a greater impact. La Liga will continue to argue the case for further increases, to save as many Colombians as possible from tobacco-related cancer. They encourage cancer organizations in every country to do the same.

Dr. Castro concludes: *“We need to unite to avert an increase in preventable, tobacco-related cancers and cancer deaths. Science is the only way to defeat the tobacco industry’s lies. I encourage cancer organizations to take assistance and advice, as we did, from organizations like UICC, American Cancer Society and Cancer Research UK. But it’s the cancer organizations in each country, who have the respect and the ears of the government, media and public, who must act to make the argument for increasing tobacco taxes and ensure governments follow through with strong legislation. This way, we can reduce preventable cancer deaths.”*