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Manipulating Science to Influence Tobacco Taxation in Sri Lanka

Perera NCS[1], Abeyratne EHS[1], Asantha WAJB[1], Dineshkumar P[1], Nilaweera AI[1,2,3], Perera KMN[1,4], Rajasuriya MC[1,5], Kapoor S[6]

[1]*Centre for Combating Tobacco, Faculty of Medicine, University of Colombo*
[2]*Postgraduate Institute of Medicine, University of Colombo*
[3]*Department of Allied Health Sciences, Faculty of Medicine, University of Colombo*
[4]*Department of Public Health, Faculty of Medicine, University of Kelaniya*
[5]*Riverland Mallee Coorong Local Health Network, Riverland General Hospital, Berri SA, Australia*
[6]*STOP, Vital Strategies*

Background: Tobacco taxation is the single-most potent, cost-effective strategy to reduce tobacco use. Global evidence suggests that tobacco industry (TI) uses a range of tactics, including sponsoring research and manipulating evidence, to interfere in tax measures.

Objective: To explore TI interference in manipulating scientific evidence to undermine effective tobacco taxation in Sri Lanka, and its potential implications.

Methods: Investigative research methods were used to identify information sources. A desk review and content analysis of photographs, media reports, official websites, and TI publications was conducted. Data was thematically analysed to identify patterns of potential TI interference and implications.

Results: Eight publications supporting industry narratives against tobacco taxation were identified; seven published by a research and consultancy firm, one-a group of academics. Common tactics identified included misinformation, misinterpretation of evidence, unsupported statements, inadequately described, non-scientific, industry research-based methodology and undisclosed funders.
Statements supporting TI narratives included: increased illicit trade and beedi consumption, reduced government tax revenue and loss of employment.
Three publications were released just before the annual budget speeches in 2019 and in 2022.
Reports were launched ceremoniously, presenting to the Ministers of Finance and senior officials in the departments of Customs and Excise and propagated widely using national media platforms.

Conclusion: Findings suggest manipulation of research and strategic use of policy moments are present against effective tobacco taxation in Sri Lanka. Strengthening implementation of WHO FCTC Article 5.3, and introducing codes of conduct for public officials and improving knowledge of media personnel are necessary to safeguard tobacco taxation policies.