

Tobacco Control in Pakistan - Challenges and Opportunities Going Beyond the Pandemic

According to the WHO (2021), tobacco is the single largest cause of preventable death across the globe killing more than 8 million annually. More than 80% of the world's 1.3 billion tobacco users live in Low-and-Middle-Income-Countries (LMICs). Pakistan is one of the top ten LMICs which has the highest prevalence of tobacco usage. Tobacco contains multiple carcinogens which can cause cancer in the lungs, esophagus, larynx, mouth, throat, kidney, bladder, liver, pancreas, stomach, cervix, colon, and rectum, as well as acute myeloid leukemia.

COVID-19 has added to the enormity of health challenges and affected the dwindling health systems across the globe. Pakistan has been very successful in handling the COVID-19 pandemic and has fared better than many developed countries. However, this has been an epiphany for the masses and for the policymakers necessitating immediate and intense contemplation in improving preventive and defensive measures. Scientific evidence during the pandemic has also revealed that smoking increases the risk infectious diseases (Jiang et al. 2020) and Coronavirus (Lewis 2020), inviting attention towards adoption of WHO guidelines and public health measures (Hoo et al. 2021).

The problems related to tobacco usage and smoking/non-smoking products in Pakistan have also been complicated by absence of a comprehensive Tobacco Control Policy, and a sudden rise in the usage of Next Generation Products (NGPs). Although the government has implemented the much-awaited Track & Trace System to monitor the production and consumption of many products, including tobacco packs, it is too early to assess the outcomes.

With the foregoing in view, this panel will deliberate on the following aspects:

- How has COVID-19 impacted tobacco consumption and appetite during and beyond the pandemic?
- What are the implications of implementation of Track & Trace System in tobacco domain and how can this be made more effective?
- How can the 'WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC)'s MPOWER¹ measures be made more effective so Pakistan can meet its international treaty obligations?
- How can spread of NGPs be reduced and what is the way forward in regulation of these products in Pakistan?

References

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¹ Set of six cost-effective and high impact measures that help countries reduce demand for tobacco.

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Panel Organisers

Mr Syed Ali Wasif Naqvi, Senior Research Associate, Sustainable Development Policy Institute, Islamabad, Pakistan

Email: wasif@sdpi.org

Mr Waseem Iftikhar Janjua, Visiting Researcher, Sustainable Development Policy Institute, Islamabad, Pakistan

Email: waseem@sdpi.org