

“What is bad for big tobacco is good for public health”: Key stakeholders’ perceptions of the tobacco industry’s role in delaying South Africa’s new legislation

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Introduction

In South Africa, tobacco control and prevention advocates have been working to pass new tobacco control legislation over the past decade. Despite the government having initiated amendments to existing tobacco laws in 2018 to keep pace with global recommendations, the policy-making process has stalled. The reasons for delays in passing South Africa’s new tobacco legislation remain unclear. This study aimed to explore key stakeholder perceptions about the role played by the industry in delaying the new tobacco legislation. We applied the multiple streams framework to analyse this tobacco policymaking process.

Methods

A qualitative case study was conducted. Purposive and snowball sampling was used to recruit thirteen tobacco control and prevention stakeholders (lobbyists, experts, and advocates). Data was collected over four months (May – September 2021) using key informant interviews. Thematic analysis of verbatim transcripts was conducted.

Findings

Interviews revealed perceptions that South Africa needs to catch up in implementing international tobacco control and prevention recommendations. Participants described how the industry would lose if new tobacco legislation were enacted. Stakeholders believed that the tobacco industry influenced and interfered with the policy process in several ways, including threats of litigation. While a Tobacco Draft Bill (X-2018) existed, there were views of limited capacity and political will to move the policy agenda forward. The COVID-19 pandemic was viewed to have created a window of opportunity for adopting the new tobacco legislation, but this window may have closed, resulting in further delays.

Conclusion

Reduction of tobacco-related harm and countering the industry’s power, influence, and interference in delaying the new tobacco control policy passage tobacco-related is possible through the government making significant strides towards adopting and implementing the proposed tobacco Bill (X-2018).

Advocacy message: This study synthesises the tobacco industry tactics, which could assist with advocacy, and it highlights the need for concrete capacity in recognising some subtle tactics and how to counter them.

Keywords: tobacco control and prevention, healthy public policy, industry interference and influence

Word count: 308 words