Banning Safer Nicotine Products: Fueling Smoking, Not Fighting It

Bans on safer nicotine products (SNPs) in low-and middle-income countries (LMICs), especially across the Asia Pacific, are having serious unintended consequences. Although these policies are often introduced with the intention of protecting protect public health, growing evidence shows they may be making the situation worse.

Instead of reducing nicotine use, banning these products often leads to more cigarette smoking. This is especially true among young people and low-income populations. For example, after India banned vaping nationwide in 2019, cigarette sales rose by over 8 percent between 2022 and 2023, according to data from Goldman Sachs and ITC Limited. A similar trend has been seen in the Maldives.

These bans have also fueled the growth of black markets. Without access to legal, regulated products, many people turn to unregulated, underground sources. In Thailand, for instance, the black market for SNPs has become a multi-million-dollar industry despite harsh penalties. These illicit products often come with unknown ingredients and increased health risks.

LMICs carry some of the highest rates of tobacco-related illness and death in the world. Most of the world's 1.3 billion tobacco users, about 80 percent, live in these countries. Yet many of them have limited access to tools that help people quit smoking. By banning safer alternatives like vaping, these countries are missing a critical opportunity to reduce harm.

Many of these policies follow guidance from the World Health Organization's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC). However, they often ignore successful real-world examples from countries like Japan, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand where vaping has helped reduce smoking rates. This approach favors ideology over evidence.

Bans in Asia Pacific, where tobacco-related harm is among the highest in the world, are blocking progress. Instead of helping, they maintain the deadly status quo of smoking and unsafe oral nicotine use.

A better path forward is clear. Governments should adopt evidence-based, consumer-informed regulation. This includes providing education and ensuring access so adult smokers understand their options and can choose safer alternatives. This change is urgently needed to reduce the Asia Pacific region's burden of tobacco-related disease and death.

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