

The International Tobacco Control Policy Evaluation Project



ITC Thailand Summary

FEBRUARY 2009



Promoting Evidence-Based Strategies to Fight the Global Tobacco Epidemic



International Tobacco Control
Policy Evaluation Project

ITC THAILAND SURVEY: SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

This summary presents key findings from Waves 1 and 2 of the ITC Thailand Survey—a face-to-face survey of a cohort sample of 2,000 adult smokers and a self-administered survey of 1,000 youth in Thailand. As a party to the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) (signed in 2003 and ratified in 2004), Thailand is one of the leading countries in the implementation of policy measures to prevent and reduce the public health impacts of tobacco consumption. This summary highlights attitudes and behaviours of smokers and youth before and after the implementation of policies on 1) health warning labels; and 2) the promotion of tobacco at the point of sale. The findings are intended to assist policymakers in implementing effective tobacco control policies in Thailand. Detailed results of the ITC Thailand Surveys are available in the ITC Thailand National Report at www.itcproject.org.

ITC Thailand Survey

Survey Mode: Face-to-face and self-administered questionnaire

Survey Sample: 2,000 adult smokers and 1,000 youth

Wave 1 Survey Dates: January to March 2005

Wave 2 Survey Dates: July to September 2006

Project Partners: Institute for Population and Social Research, Mahidol University Salaya and Thai Health Promotion Foundation

Objective: To create a system for comprehensive surveillance and evaluation of tobacco control initiatives in Thailand as they are implemented in accordance with their FCTC obligations. These policies include: 1) increasing the size of health warnings from 30% to 50% of the pack and adding graphic pictures; and 2) banning the display of cigarettes at point of sale.

Smoking has decreased, but is still a serious concern

Smoking prevalence has decreased from 26% in the early 1990s to 18% (34% in men and 2% in women) in 2004 among regular smokers 11 years of age or older¹. The ITC Thailand Survey found that Thai smokers smoke on average less than a pack (13.4 cigarettes) per day, with half of all daily smokers (54%) smoking 10 cigarettes or less per day. This is among the lowest level of consumption of all countries surveyed by the ITC Project. Nonetheless, smoking continues to be a serious health concern. The ITC Survey found that 95% of Thai smokers smoke daily, of which 88% reported feeling “very” or “somewhat” addicted to cigarettes.

Smoking rates are higher among male youth than female youth

Consistent with findings in other Asian countries, smoking is a greater problem among Thai young males than young females². The ITC Thailand Survey found that among youth aged 13 to 17, less than 1% of females were daily smokers in Wave 1 and Wave 2. In contrast, 5% of males were daily smokers in Wave 1 and 11% in Wave 2 and a further 3% (Wave 1) and 7% (Wave 2) smoked almost every day. The average age of trying their first cigarette was 13.8 years among males and 14.3 years among females. Among these youth, 42% of males reported smoking with their parents “sometimes” or “often”. Thus, despite the generally high levels of concern about the consequences of smoking, it seems that certain cultural norms persist in encouraging smoking among youth, particularly among males.

What is the ITC Project?

The International Tobacco Control Policy Evaluation Project (the ITC Project) is the first-ever international cohort study of tobacco use. It is designed to evaluate the impact of policies implemented under the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC). Each ITC Survey follows standardized protocols and includes rigorous measures to assess the impact and identify the determinants of effective tobacco control policies in the following areas:

- health warning labels and package descriptors
- smoke-free legislation
- pricing and taxation of tobacco products
- education and support for cessation
- tobacco advertising and promotion

ITC Survey findings will provide an evidence base to guide policies enacted under the FCTC, and to systematically evaluate the effectiveness of these legislative efforts.

Many Thai smokers do not have plans to quit

More than half (59%) of Thai smokers have no plans to quit smoking, the highest rate of smokers with no quit intentions among all ITC countries surveyed. However the vast majority of smokers (93%) regret their habit, 77% of adult smokers have “ever” attempted to quit smoking, and 19% intend to quit within the next six months. Concern about the consequences on their personal health and wanting to set a good example for children are the most commonly selected reasons for wanting to quit.

Thai smokers understand the harm of smoking and support stronger government action

A majority of smokers (82%) have thought regularly about harm from smoking over the past month. Almost 41% of smokers have “often” or “very often” thought about the money spent on cigarettes. More than three-quarters (76%) of smokers reported spending essential household money on cigarettes in the last six months. The majority (91%) of Thai smokers “agree” or “strongly agree” that the government should do more to tackle the harm done by smoking.

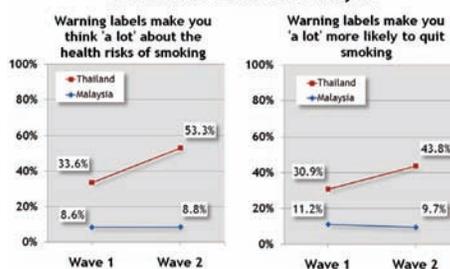
¹ WHO Report on the Global Tobacco Epidemic, 2008: The MPOWER package (2008). Geneva, World Health Organization.

² Hammond, D., Foong, K., Prohmmo, A., Kungskulniti, N., Lian, T.Y., Sharma, S.K., et al. (2009). Patterns of smoking among adolescents in Malaysia and Thailand: Findings from the International Tobacco Control Southeast Asia Survey. *Asia Pac J Public Health* 20, 3, 193-203.

Warning label effectiveness increased with larger and pictorial warnings

The ITC Thailand Survey found that increasing the size and adding graphic images to warning labels greatly increases their effectiveness. At Wave 1, the Thai warnings were at the FCTC minimum standard: 30% of the front and back with text only. Shortly after Wave 1, the warnings were enhanced to 50% of the pack plus graphic images—among the strongest warnings in the world. At Wave 2, the percentage of smokers stating that the labels made them think about the health risks “a lot” increased from 34% to 53%, and those stating that the labels made them “a lot” more likely to quit increased from 31% to 44%. The ITC Malaysia Survey—conducted at the same times—showed no such increases: their labels did not change during that time³.

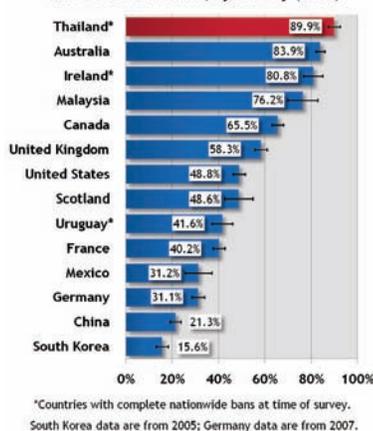
Fig 1. The effect of warning labels on cigarette packages on smokers in Thailand and Malaysia



Smoke-free laws are highly accepted

In 1992, Thailand implemented a smoke-free law for all air-conditioned workplaces and a partial ban on smoking in air-conditioned restaurants. This was extended to a full smoking ban in air-conditioned restaurants in 2003, and a complete ban in pubs and bars in 2007. Thai smokers strongly support 100% smoke-free public places. Support for a complete ban (i.e. no designated smoking areas) on smoking in workplaces increased from 55 to 75% between Wave 1 and Wave 2. For restaurants, support for a complete ban increased from 76% to 90%—the highest rate of all ITC countries surveyed. The prevalence of completely smoke-free restaurants and coffee shops increased from 58 to 73% between Wave 1 and Wave 2. Smoke-free laws are well accepted by smokers as 95% reported not having smoked in such places at Wave 1 and 94% did not smoke in these venues at Wave 2.

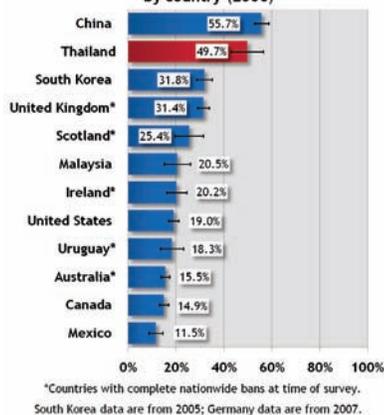
Fig 2. Percentage of smokers who felt smoking should not be allowed anywhere indoors in restaurants, by country (2006)



Cigarettes are still displayed by vendors

Tobacco advertising legislation in Thailand is among the most comprehensive in the world and has been successful in keeping exposure to all forms of tobacco advertising and promotion to a minimum⁴. In September 2005, Thailand banned cigarette displays at point of sale. At Wave 2, eight months after the ban, 81% of participants believed that cigarette displays promote youth smoking and 79% believed a ban on cigarette displays would be “somewhat” or “very” effective at reducing the amount that people smoke. At Wave 2, 91% of adults reported being aware of the ban, and 83% supported a complete ban on cigarette displays “a lot”. However 17% of adults and 53% of youth reported still having seen cigarette packages displayed in retail establishments.

Fig 3. Percentage of smokers who ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’ that light cigarettes are less harmful than regular cigarettes, by country (2006)



Smokers believe that “light/mild” cigarettes are less harmful

In Western countries, “light/mild” and “low-tar” cigarettes have been marketed to appeal to health concerned smokers, who believe that such brands are less harmful. In reality, “light/mild” or “low-tar” cigarettes offer little or no reduction of harm from smoking. The ITC Thailand Survey found that 50% of adult smokers believed that such cigarettes were less harmful, the second highest among 14 ITC countries. In March 2007, Thailand banned the use of these misleading terms. The ITC Project is currently evaluating the impact of this, however we note that the ITC evaluation of the United Kingdom ban in 2003⁵ showed that the ban did not lead to a reduction in misperceptions. This suggests that additional efforts, such as media campaigns, may be necessary to reduce the common misperception that “lights” are less harmful. (SEE SIDEBAR)

3 Fong, G.T., Hammond, D., Borland, R., Sirirassamee, B., Omar, M., Driezen, P., et al. (2009). Increasing size and adding graphic images to health warning labels in Thailand increased their effectiveness: Findings from the ITC Thailand and Malaysia Surveys. Manuscript in preparation.

4 Yong, H.H., Borland, R., Hammond, D., Sirirassamee, B., Ritthiphakdee, B., Awang, R., et al. (2008). Levels and correlates of awareness of tobacco promotional activities among adult smokers in Malaysia and Thailand: findings from the International Tobacco Control Southeast Asia (ITC-SEA) Survey. *Tob Control* 17:46-52.

5 Borland, R., Fong, G.T., Yong, H.H., Cummings, K.M., Hammond, D., King, B. et al. (2008). What happened to smokers’ beliefs about light cigarettes when “light/mild” brand descriptors were banned in the UK? Findings from the International Tobacco Control (ITC) Four Country Survey. *Tob Control* 17:256-262.

Future directions for tobacco control in Thailand

Thailand is one of the leading countries in tobacco control, having introduced pictorial warning labels, a ban on misleading package descriptors, and a ban on point of sale cigarette displays. However, despite these policies, 34% of men continue to smoke in Thailand and more than half of Thai smokers have no plans to quit.

Although misleading terms like “light” and “mild” have been banned, the tobacco industry continues to create a false impression that some brands are less harmful by using lighter colours in their package design. Further regulations are needed to prohibit deceptive information on cigarette packages, including misleading substitutes for “light” and “mild” and use of lighter colour. Stronger packaging and labeling measures are consistent with recent guidelines for Article 11 of the FCTC. Broad access to effective education programs is also needed to correct high levels of misperceptions among Thai smokers.

Smoke-free laws have been very successful, and highly accepted by Thai society. Restrictions on smoking in public places are among the most effective ways of reducing tobacco consumption. Guidelines for Article 8 of the FCTC promote strengthened and expanded efforts to achieve 100% smoke-free environments, including monitoring and evaluation of enforcement of legislation.

The ban on cigarette displays at point of sale is also widely supported by adult smokers; however, this policy has not been adopted by all retail establishments. Enforcement of the ban needs to be strengthened to prevent this form of tobacco promotion from increasing smoking susceptibility, experimentation, and uptake among youth.

Despite Thailand’s strong tobacco control policies, the vast majority of Thai smokers (91%) support even stronger tobacco control efforts.

OUR ITC PARTNER COUNTRIES

Sponsoring Organizations

The ITC Project has been widely supported by leading international granting agencies. Major grant support has been provided by:

U.S. National Cancer Institute
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National Health and Medical Research Council (Australia)
Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
Cancer Research U.K.
France: Institut national de prévention et d'éducation pour la santé (INPES) and Institut national du cancer (INCa)
Germany: Germany Cancer Research Center, German Ministry of Health and the Dieter Mennekes-Umweltstiftung
Netherlands: STIVORO and ZonMw
China CDC Tobacco Control Office
Thailand: Thai Health Promotion Foundation

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The ITC Project continues to explore opportunities for collaborating with low and middle income countries to help policymakers design, implement, and evaluate FCTC policies where the tobacco industry is focusing its advertising and promotion efforts.

THE ITC INTERNATIONAL TEAM

The ITC international research team includes over 80 tobacco control researchers in 19 countries worldwide. Its Principal Investigators are:

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Ron Borland – The Cancer Council Victoria, Australia
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David Hammond – University of Waterloo, Canada
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ITC THAILAND PROJECT TEAM

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Richard J. O'Connor, K. Michael Cummings – Roswell Park Cancer Institute
Hana Ross – American Cancer Society

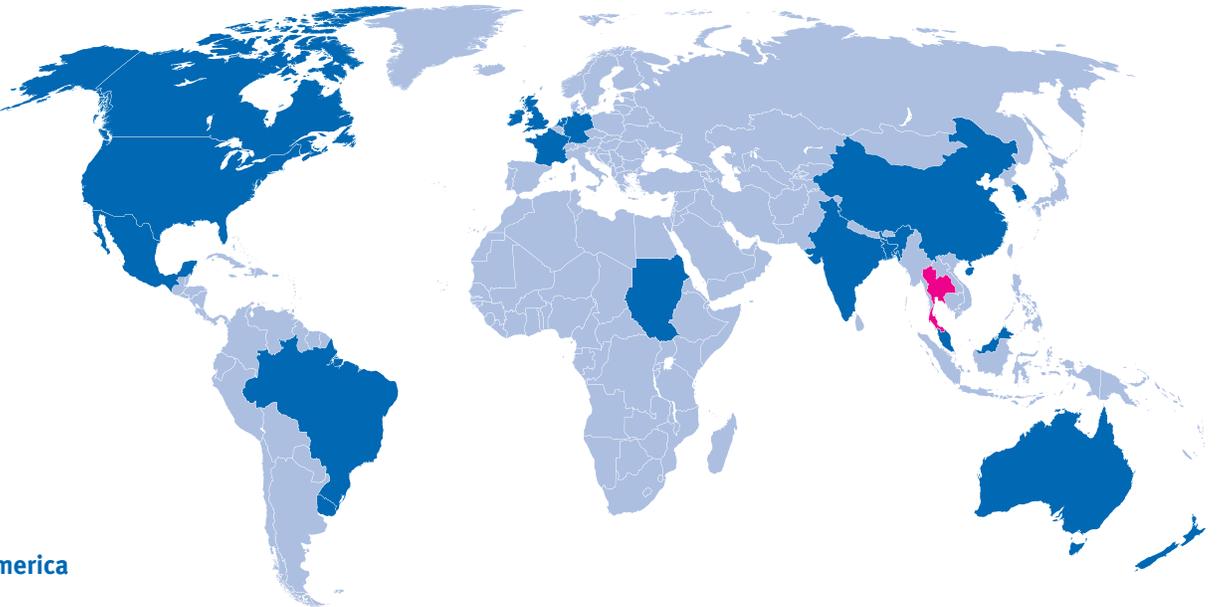
*Principal Investigators

THE ITC PROJECT: EVALUATING THE IMPACT OF FCTC POLICIES IN...

19 countries • 50% of the world's population • 60% of the world's smokers • 70% of the world's tobacco users

Australia
Bangladesh
Brazil
Canada
China (Mainland)
France
Germany
India
Ireland
Malaysia
Mexico
Netherlands
New Zealand
South Korea
*Sudan
Thailand
United Kingdom
Uruguay
United States of America

*Under Development



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