

Advancing Tobacco Plain and Standardized Packaging in Low- and Middle-Income Countries: Advice from Experts



Introduction

Tobacco packs can be colorful, attractive, and come in exciting shapes and sizes. Plain and standardized packaging removes the potential for companies to use these attractive elements by only allowing the tobacco pack to be presented in one color, shape, and size that is designed to be minimally attractive. This policy stipulates that packs may contain no brand imagery, and also that the brand name be written in a specific font, color, and size. Australia was the first country to introduce plain and standardized packaging for cigarettes in 2011, with the law taking effect in 2012. As of January 2020, France, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Norway, Ireland, and Saudi Arabia have fully implemented plain and standardized packaging laws at the retail level. Thailand, Uruguay, Slovenia, Turkey, Israel, Canada, Singapore, Belgium, and Hungary have all passed or adopted plain and standardized packaging laws and are awaiting full implementation. Many additional countries are either debating or considering similar policies.

We were interested in identifying specific studies or bodies of evidence that were viewed as crucial in the successful passage and implementation of tobacco plain packaging policy. Our goal is to inform low- and middle-income countries (LMIC) looking to pursue plain and standardized packaging with recommendations on critical research components, including study designs, study populations, and relevant research questions.



Cigarette packs from New Zealand

Methods

We conducted semi-structured interviews with 23 participants who played significant roles, as policymakers, tobacco control advocates, or researchers, in the passage of tobacco product plain and standardized packaging policies in their countries (Australia, New Zealand, UK, France, Ireland, Norway, Canada, Thailand, and Uruguay).

Participants were recruited by reviewing authors of relevant tobacco plain and standardized packaging papers and reports, as well as those who were known by the team to have played a significant role in the process of plain packaging policy development, enactment, implementation, and/or litigation in at least one of our focus countries. Participants being interviewed were also asked to identify other individuals who may be appropriate for the study (snowball sampling).

Twenty-one interviews were conducted via telephone and recorded, another was



Cigarette packs from Australia (left) and China (right)

conducted via telephone and not recorded, and the last was conducted via email. All audio recordings, one email exchange, and the interview notes from the unrecorded interview were imported into MAXQDA [Analytic Pro 2018] for coding and analysis. A codebook was developed from summarized memos of each interview and further refined following the coding of a subset of interviews. All interviews were coded by one primary analyst, with a second analyst reviewing all coded interviews to ensure consistency and accuracy.

Table 1: Distribution of participants by country and role

Country	Role of Participant at Time of Plain Packaging Implementation			
	Civil Society/Advocate	Government	Researcher	Total
Australia	3	1	2	6
Canada	1	1	1	3
France	0	0	2	2
Ireland	2	0	0	2
New Zealand	0	1	1	2
Norway	1	1	1	3
Thailand	1	0	0	1
UK	1	2	0	3
Uruguay	1	0	0	1
Total	10	6	7	23



Results

A Global Support Network

All interviewees highlighted that an informal, global network of individuals supportive of plain packaging policy exists and it has been influential in various countries. Australian stakeholders were particularly important in helping other countries and helped build an informal global network. This group and the shared experience of working on plain and standardized packaging, guided and aided each other in their respective work.

The Cancer Council Victoria, Australia created a website (<https://www.cancervic.org.au/plainfacts>) during the initial work on implementing plain and standardized packaging. The website has continued to serve as an open resource that compiles the

evidence of tobacco plain and standardized packaging and provides summaries of evidence to combat tobacco industry arguments that have been used in every country against plain and standardized packaging. During interviews with the Australians, this website was referenced often as being helpful in maintaining a clearinghouse of data, fact sheets, and critiques against tobacco industry arguments for advocates, media, and the public to use. The site continues to be updated with plain and standardized packaging developments from around the world.

The Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids (CTFK) also maintains a Plain Packaging Toolkit website (<https://www.tobaccofreekids.org/plainpackaging>) designed to educate

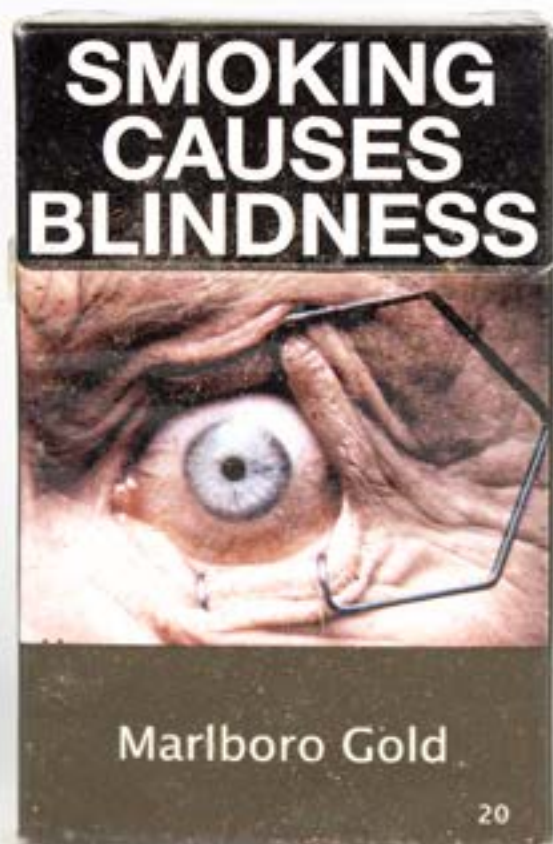
and aid countries and advocates on plain and standardized packaging. The website hosts step-by-step guides for policymakers to take them from setting policy objectives, all the way to drafting the law. Additionally, the International Legal Consortium at CTFK maintains a roster of lawyers with expertise in public health and international law.

The McCabe Center for Law and Cancer (Melbourne, Australia) was asked by the Secretariat of the FCTC to serve as a knowledge hub for legal challenges to implementation of the FCTC. They focus on the relationship between international trade, investment law and FCTC implementation, and domestic legal challenges against tobacco control measures. The McCabe Center offers a week-long course on tobacco plain packaging

where they explore Australia's legal victory in the World Trade Organization dispute.

Trailblazing a path for tobacco control: Australian plain tobacco package development and design evidence

As the first country to implement plain packaging, Australia needed to ensure the research supporting their proposed legislation was solid. Several of the Australians in the sample described knowing that the process to design and implement plain cigarette packaging would encounter political and public resistance, and tobacco industry opposition. Sufficient evidence for every design decision was needed. That evidence was then used to counter the eventual legal challenges from the tobacco industry. With the responsibility



Cigarette pack from Australia: front (left) and back (right)

of being the first country to implement plain and standardized packaging and setting the correct example on the global stage, strong political support combined with global leaders in tobacco control research and advocacy, informed and directed a series of studies that established the color, shape, font type, font size, and the placement and type of warning labels that would comprise their new tobacco packages. The objective of this new evidence was to create a cigarette pack design that would maximize the salience of the warning labels and minimize the appeal of the package. An interviewee (AU-3) who worked in civil society in Australia described it as:



Cigarette pack from France

“The most important aspect of it, I don’t want to single out one [study], it was that it [Australian government market research reports on tobacco plain packaging and graphic warnings conducted by GfK Bluemoon] was so comprehensive. It covered everything. From the type face to be used, to the kind of images that should be displayed, to what the industry could be allowed to say, to the color.”

...

“The work was so meticulous. I’ve seen good [policies] that has foundered because the research just wasn’t up to scruff. The whole body of research [for plain and standardized packaging] was so meticulous. It didn’t give the industry anything to target... what was important was how good the department was in commissioning the right kind of research from the right people.”

...

“The Commonwealth [health] department

had commissioned the research and they came up with a very solid basis for the political decision [for plain and standardized packaging].

- Australian member of civil society (3)

The comprehensiveness of the market research on tobacco plain packaging and graphic health warnings in Australia set the precedent for all future countries that wished to pursue plain and standardized cigarette packaging. The basic design and color of the Australian plain cigarette package has been emulated across nearly every country where plain and standardized packaging has been implemented. The evidence generated in Australia has been tested in various courts and continues to be used for nearly every country that has implemented plain and standardized packaging.

“We cannibalized what they did in Australia. If you look at it carefully and look at the Australian act and look at our [Irish] act, and the UK act, they are almost identical...the language is almost the same. They [Australia] did it [conduct market research on plain and standardized packaging] and it worked. And they put phenomenal work into what they [Australia] did. My goal is on that, and maybe I’m wrong on that, but everyone doesn’t have to repeat it [primary market research on plain and standardized packaging]. Australia did it, because they have the resources to do it. They knew they were going to be the trailblazers and they were going to get hauled through the courts, left, right, and center. Through WTO [World Trade Organization], through everything. They shared all their research with us and the market research they did on the colors and stuff like that is voluminous. And it is testament to them as well, that both us and the UK, and France picked the same color. And anybody who reads their research would say we are going to pick that color as well because no way we have those resources to come up with a different answer. There was so much that they had done... it’s transferrable”

- Irish member of civil society (1)

However, some countries did conduct research to confirm the findings from Australia. Interviewees noted that the research that was conducted was to confirm the color of the cigarette plain and standardized package was less appealing than a fully branded pack.

“When the Australian plain pack was adopted, we [France] conducted research with the green brown color, the same color in Australia”

- French Researcher (2)

Australian Post-Implementation Evaluation of Plain and Standardized Packaging

Following implementation, the Australian government conducted a post-implementation evaluation of plain and standardized packaging.¹ The evaluation confirmed that by severely restricting the ability of the pack to communicate and create appeal, the overall appeal of the cigarette pack decreased among adolescents and young people, quit attempts increased, health warning label impact increased, smokers were more likely to conceal their packs in public, and none of the unintended consequences the tobacco industry alleged occurred. Official



Cigarette pack from France

statistics on smoking rates and tobacco consumption in Australia found that there were significant decreases in the prevalence of daily smokers, delays among young people picking up smoking, and a decline in the use of unbranded illicit tobacco. The research published in *Tobacco Control*² and/or the post-implementation evaluation¹ was specifically mentioned by nearly everyone interviewed as being vitally important. The evidence from the post-implementation evaluation confirmed for other countries that plain and standardized packaging does work and that its impacts are real and that the primary arguments raised by the tobacco industry held no merit; indeed, the evaluation found that plain and standardized packaging works and that it does not lead to an increase in illicit tobacco sales.



Compiling and generating the evidence base

Five systematic reviews have been widely cited and used to support plain and standardized packaging: Cancer Council Victoria, 2011³; Stirling reviews, 2012⁴ and 2013⁵; Chantler review, 2014⁶; Hammond review for the Irish government, 2014⁷. Each of these reviews are notable for their breadth and diversity of methods and for the strong consistency of the results. They concluded that evidence on plain and standardized packaging showed a consistency in the decrease of cigarette packaging appeal and an increased awareness of printed health warning labels, and intention to quit. The most recent systematic review, the Cochrane Review, 2017⁸ includes the Australian post-implementation evaluation¹. The Cochrane Review found further evidence of an impact on quit attempts and avoidance, smoking prevalence, consumption, reduced smoking, and intention to smoke among non-smoking youth. In addition to these systematic reviews of evidence and post-implementation evaluation in Australia, France, and the UK⁹

“The other information we used was, Australia’s release of the evaluation of the effect of plain packaging cigarette pack on smoking prevalence, after 30 months, smoking prevalence attributable to plain packaging [declined by] 0.55%. We make a calculation if plain packaging will have the same effect in Thailand, as in Australia, it will reduce the number of Thai smokers by about 100,000 annually”

- Thai member of civil society (1)

“The main counter argument from industry was that plain packaging would increase the illicit trade and that also it was in breach of the WTO law and when it comes to illicit trade we could use the post implementation review report from Australia to counter those arguments”

- Norwegian government official (2)



Cigarette packs from left to right: Uruguay, New Zealand, Ireland, Norway, Australia, France

have plans to undertake impact assessments of their respective plain and standardized packaging laws.

Each of the systematic reviews cited above are comprised of published qualitative, quantitative, and experimental studies. For many of the interviewees, no one study was more significant than another. However, it was

the volume of the data and the summaries from the published and unpublished systematic reviews that was seen as being critical. In many instances, respondents reported that a compilation of plain and standardized packaging evidence was necessary or requested early on by lawmakers. For many, this signaled a vital first step in the legislative process.



Cigarette pack from Uruguay

“I relied on a number of systematic reviews of evidence [Stirling reviews and Chantler report] during the decision-making process”

- UK government official (3)

In Norway, interviewees reported that after conducting the first systematic review of the evidence on plain and standardized packaging, they saw that scant data were available on snus, a local Norwegian smokeless tobacco product. As the Norwegians planned on

covering snus in the legislation, this evidence gap meant that researchers needed to consider how the appeal of snus might change under the plain and standardized packaging requirements. These data became critical when the snus industry sued the Norwegian government over the proposed plain and standardized packaging policy. The absence of non-traditional tobacco products (snus, smokeless tobacco, bidis, etc.) in countries where plain and standardized packaging had already been implemented and thoroughly researched meant that evidence was missing on the design and appeal of these products to users and how plain and standardized packaging would decrease appeal.

“If there are no studies about plain packaging in these products (local tobacco products) then it would be useful to have national studies really.”

- Norwegian researcher (1)



Cigarette packs from Uruguay

When it comes to generating new evidence to support plain and standardized packaging, ideas as to the most effective study design and methodology varied among respondents. Several interviewees commented that qualitative research could be most useful. However, respondents were also quick to highlight that people should utilize whatever expertise exists among researchers in the target country. The study objective identified by interviewees almost always included confirming that plain and standardized cigarettes (typically modeled after the Australian plain pack) are less appealing than branded cigarettes. Many interviewees noted that a study conducted in the target LMIC would aid in bridging international – mostly high-income country – data into the local context.

“Once having established the replication of the impact of plain packaging locally, replicating what has been found in other countries, then it opens up the door of the admissibility of the entire body of evidence that has been collected internationally; so it’s really important to build that bridge”

- Canadian researcher (1)



Snus product from Norway



Cigarette packs from Ireland

When communicating research results, researchers and advocates we spoke to indicated that it is essential to emphasize to policymakers that plain and standardized packaging protects children from initiating smoking. To that end, personal stories or quotes, typically obtained by qualitative research, were seen as providing the kind of rich narrative detail that would likely appeal to lawmaker’s sense of moral duty to protect children.

“In talking to politicians it’s that population level evidence seems to kind of go over their head and what they really like is if you can hit some quotes from in-depth interviews and it’s a real person and a real person’s voice, and it far more resonates with them effectively than statistics of public opinion or estimates of likely behavior and outcomes, that’s certainly what I’ve found”

- New Zealand researcher (1)

Recommendations for low- and middle-income countries

We pressed respondents on how to advance plain and standardized packaging in LMICs. Their recommendations appeared to follow the main steps their own high-income countries took to implement the measure. Many respondents across all countries interviewed noted that a systematic review of the evidence, with a view toward the target LMIC or region is an important first step. If resources are not available to commission a new systematic review of the evidence, many reviews have been completed and published that could be referenced.

“[in addition to conducting some primary research] I think making sure they’ve got an up-to-date review of the evidence, that could be commissioned.”

- Australian researcher (2)

“We say gather the best available evidence, including the international evidence, there are a handful of systematic reviews of that evidence that they should pool together.”

- Australian member of civil society (6)

Numerous respondents suggested that there would be value to studies being conducted in LMICs. The purpose of conducting these studies would be to confirm plain and standardized packaging findings from prior research from other countries in the LMIC of interest. While respondents had various opinions on the research design (qualitative or quantitative), most expressed that qualitative interviews are useful because they are relatively affordable and provide rich narrative data to present to policymakers. The objective of any research, much like in high-income countries, is to confirm that plain and standardized cigarette packaging is indeed less appealing than fully or partially branded cigarette packaging.

“I think in general, the quantitative [data] is probably more potent. But I’m not sure because I think when citing these [quantitative] studies, policymakers have been citing them often, they do it more generally; it’s not in detail in the sense that you know we have done both qualitative and quantitative studies. It’s more the results, particularly this appeal results that they [plain and standardized packs] are less appealing, and that was the conclusion in both qualitative and quantitative [studies]. So, I think for this and any study, generally the quantitative ones are considered more solid, or more believable or whatever.”

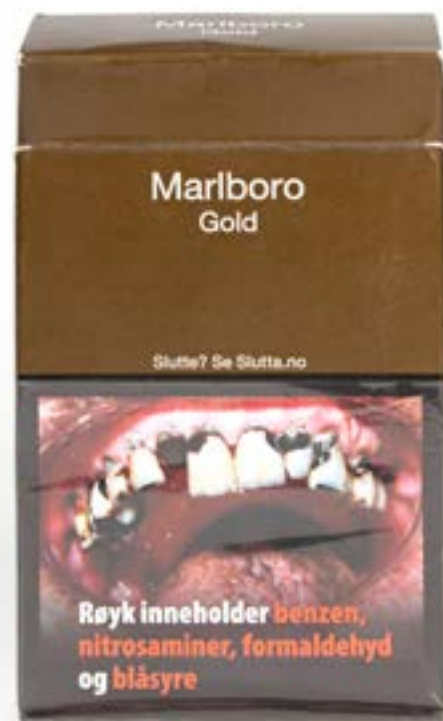
- Norwegian researcher (1)

One area where there was near consensus both in terms of experience and recommendation was that data on youth and young adults were particularly impactful. This consideration is rooted in the premise that politicians and policymakers consider tobacco control policies and more specifically plain and standardized packaging to discourage new smokers.

“In Norway we had a particular focus on the expected effects on young people, children and young people, prevention aspect of it, plain packaging was meant to prevent young people from taking up smoking”

- Norwegian member of civil society (3)

A small minority of interviewees asserted that there was no need to conduct any additional evidence in support of plain and standardized packaging in a given country. Uruguay and



Cigarette pack from Norway



Cigarette packs from Norway (left) and China (right)

Thailand, both middle-income countries that have recently passed plain and standardized packaging policies, followed a different path than outlined by high income countries. Both Uruguay and Thailand relied heavily on international evidence from Australia. In Thailand, advocacy and civil society has been slowly building the case for plain and standardized packaging with government officials using Australian data and international support from the World Health Organization and the Secretariat of the FCTC.

“In term[s] of generating research evidence to support [the] plain packaging regulation, we only did a few [studies] by following Australia’s example...when ask[ed] how do you know that plain packaging will be effective, we said it is recommended by Article 11 and 13 of [the] FCTC, an evidence based treaty, what more do you want?”

- Thai member of civil society (1)

Further, a Canadian advocate we spoke to emphasized alongside having research evidence, it may be more important for countries to be aware of the political environment and to have a political champion who is willing to spend the time to work on plain and standardized packaging and engage in a strong advocacy network to support the process. This Canadian advocate (CA-3) described his thinking this way:

“I would not recommend that [domestic studies be conducted to confirm plain and standardized packaging evidence] unless it was necessary. I would just do it [work on passing plain and standardized packaging]... And I think if you have a window of opportunity you should move to do it [work on passing plain and standardized packaging]. Because you have a good minister [of health] that wants to do it [pass plain and standardized packaging]. Let’s not take two years to do research before they’re gone, a new

election... in working on picture warnings in the last eight years I have not really seen as an argument that there is no domestic research as being an impediment to doing it, on the principal of doing it. Certainly, countries want to do research to see which warning would be most effective in their cultural context or country context.”

...

“The World Trade Organization, WHO, they accept that [plain packaging] works, so let’s do it. And all these other countries, quite respect to the countries, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Britain, France, Ireland and so on say it works. So why do we have to do more research to prove that it works? The reality is in tobacco control we have to prove the obvious, many times. So, I think that in a domestic context of what governments prioritize and I think it’s a matter of impact and achievability.”

...

“If you want to go for plain packaging, if the government is willing to do it. Odds are, they are probably going to be willing to do it without additional domestic research. Who is going to pay for this research? I certainly don’t think we should create the perception that you shouldn’t be doing plain packaging unless you do domestic research. Or conveying to people recommendations ‘do domestic research before you really push for it’. Because in most cases, like Hungary they did it, Slovenia did it. Are there any domestic research in Hungary or Slovenia? I don’t know, probably not. And similarly, for a whole bunch of countries. In Singapore, I don’t know if there is any domestic research, my guess is that there isn’t. but they compiled the evidence worldwide.”

- Canadian member of civil society (3)



Cigarette pack from New Zealand



Conclusion

The body of evidence generated in Australia supporting plain and standardized packaging was robust enough to carry the Australians to first implement tobacco plain and standardized packaging. The color and design of the Australian plain and standardized package has withstood intense tobacco industry opposition. Nearly every current country that has implemented plain and standardized packaging has emulated the same design as Australia. Additional evidence available from the Australian post-implementation evaluation also provides

crucial evidence to demonstrate that plain and standardized packaging works and that the tobacco industry claims are not valid. All legal actions taken against plain and standardized packaging have been unsuccessful. With more countries implementing plain and standardized packaging every year, prior experimental data will continue to be supported by real world evaluations of these policies, demonstrating that plain and standardized packaging reduces smoking and decreases the appeal of the tobacco package.

Some of the high-income countries (Ireland¹⁰, New Zealand¹¹, United Kingdom¹², Canada¹³) that were the focus of this study required as part of their legislative process, a legislative impact assessment. These assessments comprise a thorough review of the evidence on plain and standardized packaging and the public health and economic impacts of the proposed legislation. While these reviews have been necessary within the context of these countries, some countries (Uruguay and Thailand) did not require them nor were they undertaken. One of the interviewees noted that another systematic review of the evidence may not be required; rather the entire body of global evidence is sufficiently strong to demonstrate to policymakers that plain and standardized packaging is effective. However, a strong political champion and advocacy network will also be necessary to ferry plain and standardized packaging forward. Ultimately, the need for a systematic review of the evidence will be country and context specific. If a LMIC requires a legislative impact assessment, multiple examples are available.

While no one study was found to be critical in making the case for tobacco plain and standardized packaging, LMICs interested in plain and standardized packaging must consider if tobacco products other than cigarettes are widely available in their country and if they wish to incorporate that product into a proposed policy. Consideration must be made to ensure that evidence is available or needs to be conducted to support plain and standardized packaging. To fill that evidence gap, interviewees noted that



Cigarette pack from United Kingdom

qualitative research can be done relatively quickly and affordably. Any research a LMIC conducts should focus on young smokers and comparing current, branded tobacco products and the proposed plain and standardized package would yield rich narrative detail that could be used in advocacy campaigns and to persuade policymakers.

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