



Did you know?

Every cigarette sold carries a cost that extends far beyond its price tag — in

hospital beds, lost productivity, and lives cut short. But what if communities could turn that cost on its head?

As the world marks [World No Tobacco Day](#) on 31 May 2026, two stories from South-East Asia show what genuinely bold tobacco control looks like. One is about place — **Sri Lanka's experiment in making entire towns cigarette-free**. The other is about money — **Thailand's decision to make the tobacco and alcohol industries fund their own antidote**. Different paths, one destination: communities where the healthy choice is the only choice.

Case Study: Sri Lanka



Grocery store owner who agreed not to sell cigarettes in Pangollamada village, Akurana of Kandy District in Sri Lanka.
Source: WHO Sri Lanka Country Office

The Town That Said No to Cigarettes

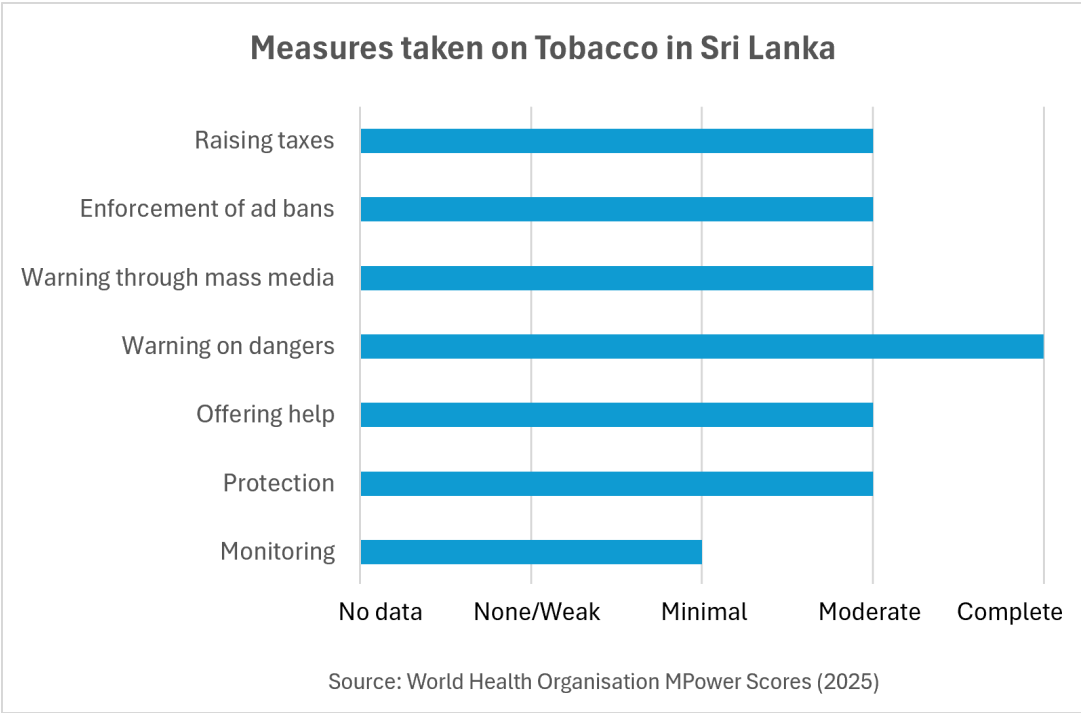
Could the most powerful tobacco control policy be one that doesn't involve taxes at all — just a community deciding enough is enough?

Sri Lanka has been a quiet pioneer since becoming the first country in South-East Asia and fourth in the world to ratify the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) in 2003. Health warning labels cover 80% of cigarette packs. Advertising bans are among the most comprehensive in the region. But one of the country's most striking initiatives operates at a far more local level: tobacco-free villages and towns where no cigarettes are sold at all.

This grassroots model grew directly from the FCTC's momentum. The convention played a role not only in shaping national legislation but in building local movements — of which tobacco-free communities are the most visible expression ([WHO FCTC Secretariat, 2016](#)). Whole communities, engaged through local leaders and civil society, collectively agree to remove tobacco from retail. No shop stocks cigarettes. No vendor sells them. The social contract is enforced not by law, but by community ownership.

The national picture, though, remains mixed. Health warnings and advertising bans score strongly under the WHO's MPOWER framework, but restaurants, cafés, and

bars sit outside complete smoke-free protections, scoring zero on compliance. Access to nicotine replacement therapy is limited, and cigarette affordability has not changed meaningfully since 2020 ([World Health Organization, 2025](#)).



Note: this chart has been updated to reflect data as of 2025

This is exactly where the tobacco-free village model matters most. Where national policy has gaps, community commitment fills them — and addresses something no tax alone can fix: the social normalisation of tobacco use. When an entire community agrees that cigarettes simply are not available, the cue to reach for one disappears.

Case Study: Thailand



"Say No! to e-Cigarettes" Walk and Run Campaign. Source: [ThaiHealth](https://www.thaihealth.or.th/)

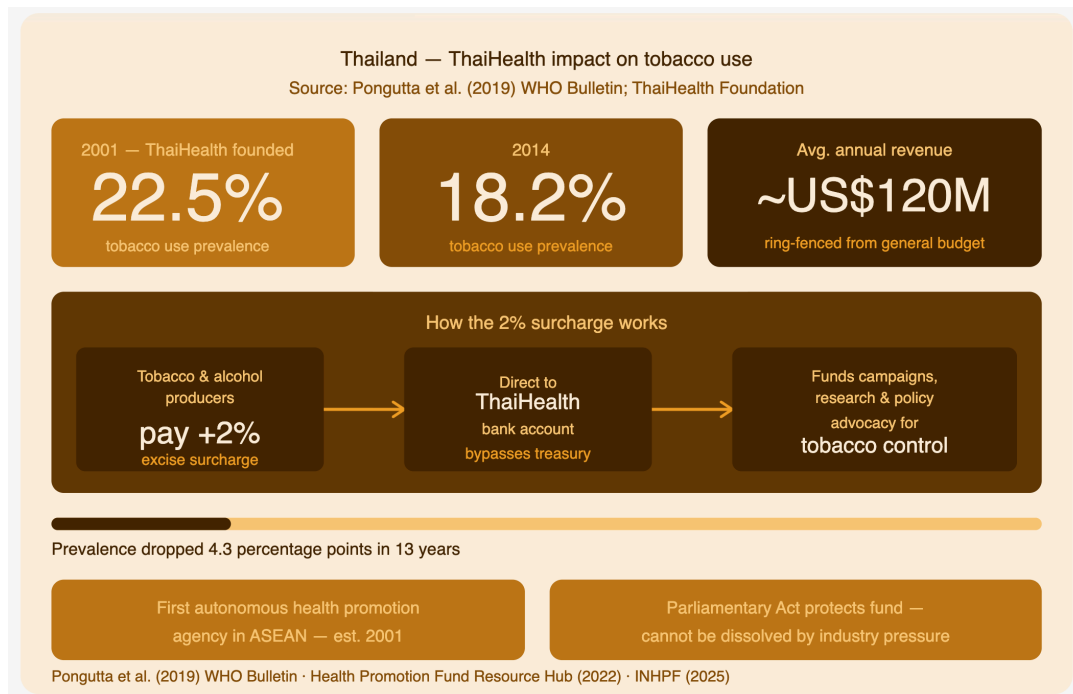
Making "Sin Taxes" Work for Health

What happens when a government tells tobacco companies: you will pay for the campaigns that convince people to quit your products?

In Thailand, the answer has been more than two decades of sustained public health progress. When parliament passed the Health Promotion Foundation Act in 2001, it established an autonomous body — the [Thai Health Promotion Foundation](https://www.thaihealth.or.th/), known as [ThaiHealth](https://www.thaihealth.or.th/) — funded by a dedicated 2% surcharge on excise taxes from tobacco and alcohol. The fund supports evidence generation, campaigns, and social mobilisation to address noncommunicable disease risk factors such as tobacco use, harmful use of alcohol, and sedentary behaviour.

ThaiHealth is the first autonomous health promotion agency of its kind in the ASEAN region, and this type of dedicated funding mechanism is widely regarded as the most effective means for securing sustainable, long-term support for health promotion. Crucially, the levy flows directly to the Foundation without passing through the Ministry of Finance, insulating health budgets from annual political negotiations ([Health Promotion Fund Resource Hub](https://www.thaihealth.or.th/)).

The results speak for themselves. [Tobacco use fell from 22.5% in 2001 to 18.2% in 2014, with ThaiHealth generating approximately US\\$120 million annually](https://www.thaihealth.or.th/). Those funds have driven expanded smoke-free areas, larger pictorial health warnings, and a total advertising ban. The journey from proposal to legislation spanned nearly seven years, driven by collaboration among health advocates, researchers, government officials, and international partners ([INHPE](https://www.thaihealth.or.th/)) — proof that sustainable health financing requires patience as much as vision.



ThaiHealth impact on tobacco use.

Shared Lessons

Sri Lanka and Thailand took very different routes, but arrived at the same insight: tobacco control must be embedded in the structures and norms of daily life, not only in law.

- **Fund health promotion sustainably.** Legislated, ring-fenced funding enables the long-term investment that one-off campaigns never can.
- **Let communities lead.** Grassroots ownership produces compliance that enforcement alone cannot achieve.
- **Close the policy gaps.** Partial measures leave space for tobacco to persist — comprehensive coverage across all public spaces and price points remains the standard to reach.
- **Tax smarter.** Revenue raised from tobacco can be reinvested in the health systems that bear its burden — a loop Thailand closed over two decades ago.

As we mark World No Tobacco Day 2026, these two models remind us that the most effective public health tools make the healthy choice the default — whether by making tobacco financially unviable, or by making it simply unavailable on the street where you live.

Editor's Pick



Global campaign World No Tobacco Day 2026 — WHO Campaign Hub

This year's WHO campaign materials, key messages, and advocacy toolkit for World No Tobacco Day on 31 May.

Download resources for your own city's awareness activities.

[Read more](#)

Stay tuned for more inspiring stories from our healthy cities network in our next update!

Share with us your city's best practices!

[Email Us](#)

WHO South-East Asia office and Regional Laboratory on Urban Governance for Health and Well-being are pleased to invite you to join South-East Asia Region Healthy Cities Network.

More information and details [here](#)

Recommended Resources

Selected resources supporting this issue's theme

[WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control](#)

[WHO Report on the Global Tobacco Epidemic, 2023](#)

Further Reading & References

Health Promotion Fund Resource Hub. (n.d.). *Thailand Health Promotion Foundation (ThaiHealth)*. Retrieved from <https://hpfhub.info/fund-management/a-global-overview-of-health-promotion-funds-and-the-agencies-that-govern-and-manage-them/thailand-health-promotion-foundation-thaihealth-2001/>

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