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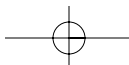
Building Momentum for Tobacco Control: The Case of Bangladesh

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Bangladesh is a small, poor, densely populated country of roughly 130 million people, about 80 percent of whom live in rural areas. It has a well-deserved reputation as being disaster-prone, having been stricken with droughts, floods, and a range of health and environmental problems, from dengue and cholera to arsenic contamination of the water supply. It should come as no surprise, then, that tobacco control has not gained much attention or been considered a priority. With so many competing causes of disease, and with nearly half the population living below the poverty line and consuming less than 2,122 calories per day (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics 1998a), tobacco has generally seemed too remote and insignificant an issue to be on the country's agenda of concerns. Yet tobacco use is widespread and increasing rapidly, and knowledge about the harm it causes to health is slight. Moreover, although other causes of death still dominate, tobacco use contributes a nontrivial amount to the overall burden of disease and death. And it has clear and significant immediate negative effects on the welfare of poor families, when scarce resources that could be used for food are instead spent on tobacco.

From the late 1980s through most of the 1990s, tobacco control remained the domain of a few groups: Amra Dhumpun Nibarón Kori (ADHUNIK), which, roughly translated, means, "We prevent tobacco"; the Bangladesh Cancer Society; Madok o Nesha Nirodh Shanthya (MANAS—the Association for the Prevention of Drug Abuse); and the National Non-Smokers' Forum. Although these groups achieved some significant successes, for the most part tobacco control remained a fringe activity that received wide publicity on World No Tobacco Day, May 31, and was then forgotten for the rest of the year.

But in 1999 the tide began to turn. The aggressive activities of British American Tobacco (BAT) pushed the advocates toward stronger action. For the first time, a number of organizations got together and coordinated



their activities. A coalition emerged, a High Court victory was obtained, and tobacco control in Bangladesh finally began to assume some of the importance and receive some of the attention it had long warranted. By late 2002, strong new legislation had been submitted for consideration by Parliament.

This case study discusses the dynamic process of tobacco control policymaking in one developing country and the role that advocates can play in informing and influencing the process. The ultimate goal has not yet been reached, but the journey has begun.

Tobacco in the Lives of the Bangladeshi People

Although Bangladesh is a Muslim country and tobacco is generally considered *haram* (forbidden) under Islam, tobacco use is widespread. The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics regularly conducts surveys that monitor, among other things, smoking rates. As table 2.1 shows, smoking rates are higher among men than women. In 1997 the highest reported rate (70.3 percent) was for men age 35–49, while the lowest (0.1 percent) was for girls age 10–14.

A significant flaw in the prevalence measures is that they cover only smoking, not tobacco consumption as a whole. Tobacco chewing is common in Bangladesh, particularly among women. A study by Naripokho, a nongovernmental organization (NGO) working on women's issues, indicates that the rate for use of all forms of tobacco, smokeless and smoked, by women is around 50 percent, but no nationwide or large-scale surveys exist to verify this finding (Haq 2001).

According to data compiled by the World Health Organization (WHO) on tobacco and cigarette production and consumption in Bangladesh, an estimated 70 percent of the tobacco produced is used for cigarettes and *bidis* (small cigarettes handrolled in paper), 20 percent is consumed as chewing tobacco, and the remainder is used in cigars, snuff, and pipe tobacco. In 1997, 16,500 million cigarettes were manufactured, consisting

Table 2.1. Smoking Rates by Age and Sex, Bangladesh, 1997 (percent)

Sex	Age				
	10–14	15–19	20–34	35–49	50+
Male	2.8	14.4	47.6	70.3	21.2
Female	0.1	0.9	3.3	6.6	2.8
Average for both sexes	1.6	8.3	23.7	41.0	12.3

Source: Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (1999).

of 2,900 million filter and 13,600 million nonfilter cigarettes. Since the mid-1980s, Bangladesh has had a growing negative trade balance in tobacco and tobacco products as leaf imports have increased strongly (see table 2.2). In 1993 export earnings amounted to US\$10 million, half of the US\$20 million that was spent on tobacco and tobacco product imports. By 1995, according to the World Bank, the negative net earnings from tobacco trade (leaves and cigarettes) had nearly tripled, to US\$27.8 million.

Although tobacco is available in a multitude of forms in Bangladesh, only cigarette packages carry a warning. This states (in Bengali), in small type, "Government warning: smoking is deleterious to health." The same warning is used on BAT billboards and on television advertisements but not on advertisements for cigarettes produced by other companies or for bidis. What little information is conveyed in the warning is inaccessible to

Table 2.2. Annual Tobacco Trade and Agricultural Statistics, Bangladesh, Selected Years, 1970–98

<i>Indicator</i>	<i>1970</i>	<i>1980</i>	<i>1990</i>	<i>1995</i>	<i>1998</i>
Cigarette imports (millions of sticks)	—	177	86	70	52
Cigarette exports (millions of sticks)	—	—	2	—	47
Tobacco leaf imports (metric tons)	—	740	805	1,137	5,012
Tobacco leaf exports Metric tons	—	—	870	278	2,307
Percentage of total exports	—	—	0.11	0.02	—
Cigarette production (millions of sticks)	17,787	13,830	12,289	17,379	—
Tobacco leaf production (metric tons)	41,200	39,524	37,800	38,000	36,655
Land devoted to growing tobacco Hectares	45,700	45,091	45,070	36,000	32,823
Percentage of agricultural land	0.50	0.49	0.48	0.44	—
Employment in tobacco manufacturing (number of workers)	4,190	6,340	27,155	—	—

— Not available.

Source: Corrao and others 2000.

the large proportion of the population unable to read. According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (1999), in 1997 only 42 percent of females and 51 percent of males over age 7 were literate.

The law has yet to set a standard for informing tobacco users about the range of diseases caused by smoking and tobacco use. One study found that while more than 93 percent of male smokers and more than 84 percent of female smokers know that smoking is generally bad for health, far fewer are aware of specific effects such as cancer, respiratory diseases, stroke, and heart disease. In general, nonsmokers have slightly higher awareness of the diseases caused by smoking than do smokers (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics 1996).

Although the lack of nationwide statistics on tobacco use makes tracking the epidemic difficult, a few facts are clear. Tobacco use (as distinguished from smoking) is widespread among men and women. Most users are not aware of the health effects, and written warnings can be read by only about half the population. Better statistics are needed to track tobacco use among the population and to monitor changes when tobacco control laws and interventions come into effect.

The Tobacco Industry in Bangladesh

The Bangladesh Tobacco Company (BTC) operated essentially as a monopoly for many years. It was originally a subsidiary of BAT, which has been doing business in Bangladesh since 1954. In the late 1990s BAT bought controlling shares in the BTC, which then began operating directly as BAT.

BAT reported pretax profits in 1998 of US\$15.4 million and had a budget of US\$3.34 million for brand promotion and development (BAT 1998). This huge promotion budget explains the ubiquitous presence of BAT brands (mostly Benson & Hedges and John Player Gold Leaf and, to a lesser extent, 555) on billboards, in newspaper advertisements, and in cigarette display cases, as well as in television advertisements and at concerts sponsored by Benson & Hedges. BAT advertises its cheaper brand, Star, less widely, mostly on inexpensive posters on the street.

About 15 local companies also produce cigarettes, which are less expensive than BAT's. The largest manufacturer of bidis is Akiz Bidi, which also produces the Navy brand. Various cheaper brands are advertised to some extent through posters, on small signs in shops, and in display cases, but Navy is the only non-BAT brand for which there is any extensive advertising.

Researchers monitored the advertisements on ATN Bangla (a Bengali-language Indian satellite television station) from 8 p.m. to 10 p.m. on a Saturday evening, a time when young people are fairly likely to be watch-

ing television (Shaha, Dhar, and Efroymsen 2000). During the two-hour period, they counted 38 tobacco advertisements, covering 14 minutes and 13 seconds. There were advertisements for two different brands of bidis and seven different brands of cigarettes. Ten advertisements for Navy brand ran during the two hours. Many of the advertisements conveyed the message that smoking makes one strong, healthy, and irresistible to women. Two examples illustrate the point:

- An oxcart gets stuck in the mud, and the driver is unable to push it out. A young man approaches, watched with great admiration by a pretty peasant girl. He takes a few puffs of a cigarette, then pushes the oxcart out of the mud and offers a cigarette to the driver. The girl is in ecstasy.
- Mr. Navy rescues a young woman from drowning. She turns out to have been faking the incident, but she wins his affection by calling him back to retrieve the pack of Navy cigarettes that fell from his pocket while he tried to resuscitate her. They frolic on the beach, then stand lovingly while he smokes.

These advertisements carry a health warning in Bengali, but it is flashed briefly either at the beginning or the end of the ad, so quickly and in such small type that it is virtually impossible to read, even by the half of the population that is literate. In any case, it simply repeats the statutory warning that is printed on cigarette packs: "Smoking is deleterious to health." The High Court of Bangladesh, in response to a petition brought by members of the Bangladesh Anti-Tobacco Alliance (BATA), recently held that this mode of flashing the warning is in violation of the law. The court went on to say that all tobacco advertising should be banned. The case is currently on appeal.

As part of its attempt to resist regulation, BAT has promoted itself as a responsible company. It has done this in several ways:

- In 2001 the company issued a voluntary code of conduct that limited tobacco advertisements on television and radio to the hours of 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. (BAT 2000).
- BAT claims that it offers samples only to smokers or tobacco users over 18 years of age.
- In newspaper advertisements and in programs distributed at cultural events sponsored by BAT, messages such as "Our events promote more than just our brands" are displayed.
- A tree nursery program supported by BAT has brought the company much positive attention. The minister of the environment has visited the Dhaka nursery, and the trees and accompanying advertising signs line some medians in Chittagong, the main port city. In August 2001

BAT set up highly publicized roadside stands in Dhaka to hand out tree saplings.

- On July 28, 2001, BAT launched a so-called Youth Smoking Prevention Campaign consisting of 30-second television advertisements, three 1-minute radio scripts, billboards, and stickers. In all the materials, BAT claimed that smoking is an adult choice, that those under age 18 should not smoke, and that BAT feels a responsibility to curtail and prevent youth smoking. More astute young people easily see through this campaign and recognize the contradiction between the company's heavily advertising its brands and yet telling youths not to smoke (WBB and PATH Canada 2001). For many, however, the campaign seems to offer evidence of how responsible and well-meaning BAT is, and it provides a further excuse for the inaction of lawmakers who wish to avoid passing tough laws to control tobacco.

The Economics of Tobacco in Bangladesh

The government of Bangladesh has sent mixed messages about tobacco. Former prime minister Sheikh Hasina has said that tobacco spending is a waste of money and that redirecting the money spent toward food purchases could lower the rate of malnutrition (BATA 2001). Yet Hasina's government awarded BAT a trophy for being one of the country's largest exporters. BAT is apparently the biggest taxpayer in the country, with reported tax payments in 1998 of approximately US\$5.55 million (BAT 1998).

But export earnings and tax payments do not provide a complete economic picture of the tobacco industry in Bangladesh. Missing are such items as the trade deficit, the costs associated with tobacco-related health problems, and the effect of smokers purchasing tobacco rather than food. In fiscal year 1997-98 Bangladesh earned US\$5.4 million in tobacco exports, but it also imported US\$19.93 million worth of tobacco, for a net loss of over US\$14.4 million (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics 1998b). Although figures on health costs associated with tobacco use are not available, the Bangladesh Cancer Society estimates that half of the annual deaths from cancer in Bangladesh (75,000 people) result from tobacco use.

The tobacco industry also has an effect on employment. Cigarettes require very little labor to manufacture. Bidi rolling is much more labor-intensive, but most of the profits are absorbed by middlemen, with the laborers, almost exclusively women and children, earning a pittance for their many hours of grueling work in uncomfortable and unhealthy settings (UNICEF 2000). According to the World Bank (1999), because most goods and services in Bangladesh require a larger labor input than cigarettes, a shift from tobacco product use and manufacturing to other products and services could mean a tremendous boon for employment.

Although tobacco is perceived as being cheap, its actual cost, compared with food, education, and health care, is quite high—exorbitantly so for those for whom basic survival is a daily struggle. A study on tobacco and poverty (Efroymson and others 2001) revealed that tobacco is most commonly used by those who can least afford it. The smoking rate among the poorest (those with a household income of less than US\$20 per month) is 58.2 percent, while for the wealthiest (those with a household income of more than US\$100 per month), it is 32.3 percent. On average across the country, spending for tobacco represents 2.8 percent of total income, from a low of 1.5 percent for households with total spending of less than US\$18 per month to a high of 4.4 percent for households spending more than US\$472 per month. The amount spent by the average male cigarette smoker in 1997 would purchase 2,942 calories of rice per day—enough to make a difference between family members getting by or suffering from malnutrition.

Between 1992 and 1996, annual per capita cigarette consumption increased by 33 percent, from 100 to 133 sticks. Meanwhile annual per capita egg consumption fell by 29 percent, from 17 to 12 eggs. In other words, per capita consumption in 1996 was 1 egg and 11 cigarettes per month. Average per capita expenditure on tobacco is almost half per capita expenditure for health, and more than half the amount spent on education. In both urban and rural areas, per capita expenditure is higher for tobacco than for milk. At 2000 prices, the money needed to purchase one pack of BAT's John Player Gold Leaf regular cigarettes would buy more than a dozen eggs, or more than a kilogram of lentils, or more than a liter of soybean oil, or half a kilogram of beef. BAT Bangladesh's gross turnover in cigarettes for 1998 (US\$293 million) could have purchased 4.7 billion eggs, or enough to feed almost 13 million children one egg per day (Efroymson and others 2001).

Efroymson and others (2001) estimate that 10.5 million children who are currently going hungry would have enough to eat if their parents redirected 69 percent of their tobacco expenditures to food. Malnutrition wreaks havoc on the Bangladesh economy: UNICEF (1998) estimates that lost lives, disability, and productivity losses caused by malnutrition cost Bangladesh the equivalent of more than 5 percent of its gross national product.

So far, research and publicity have not sufficiently impressed on policymakers and the public the negative economic impact of tobacco use in Bangladesh. As long as BAT is able to convince policymakers that the company is a positive factor in the economy, advocates are unlikely to succeed in obtaining strong tobacco control laws and policies.

Whatever the features peculiar to Bangladesh, in many ways the tobacco situation is like that in many other countries, particularly those with a similar economic status. The tobacco industry, as in most countries, is dominated by a transnational company; tobacco use is widespread, as

is ignorance of the effects of its use; and policymakers and civil society have a distance to travel to recognize the harm that tobacco does and to be convinced of the need for tobacco control legislation.

A Chronicle of Tobacco Control in Bangladesh

Until recently, tobacco control advocacy and activities were limited, and hopes and aspirations concerning the issue were generally modest. This was partly because of the many health problems that face Bangladesh but perhaps also because public health advocates felt overwhelmed and discouraged in the face of BAT's enormous influence, resources, and visibility. Then the industry went too far and sparked an extraordinary reaction, the outcome of which has given new hope and a new impetus to tobacco control efforts.

In the following necessarily simplified account, the key role played by various NGOs in studying the problem, promoting solutions, and influencing key players is evident. The government and the judicial system have also played a critical part, as have the media and the general public.

Early Concern about Tobacco Use

Although the issue of tobacco use has always attracted some interest in Bangladesh, it has mainly been perceived as a problem only by people concerned about cancer and drug use. Tobacco control was taken on by a few isolated groups with no real power to change society or public policy. And as long as tobacco use continued to be perceived as an issue of minor importance, a strong policy response was unlikely.

The dominance of doctors in tobacco control organizations kept the focus mainly on health, with little attention to the nonhealth dimensions of the epidemic such as the direct and indirect costs of health care, including lost earnings. Tobacco control efforts mostly concentrated on school programs and the organization of rallies and other small-scale events on World No Tobacco Day. The emphasis on talking to schoolchildren without taking other steps to address adult tobacco use may even have unintentionally attracted young people to using tobacco. In any case, the unsophisticated tobacco control messages were no match for glossy, attractive tobacco advertisements, particularly those of BAT.

One of the pioneer organizations involved in tobacco control was ADHUNIK, founded in 1987 by National Professor Nurul Islam.¹

1. "National Professor" is an honorific title conferred by the government.

ADHUNIK representatives held many seminars and press conferences, published information in newspapers, appeared on television, printed information about tobacco and Islam for distribution to Muslim religious leaders, and contributed to the syllabus for class 8 in Bangladeshi schools. They also succeeded in making the president's residence a non-smoking establishment (ADHUNIK 1988).

Some other organizations have worked on tobacco control for many years. Among them are

- The Bangladesh Cancer Society, which has long attempted to raise concern about the issue of tobacco use, mostly through school campaigns and programs highlighting the connection between tobacco and cancer. In 1995 the Cancer Society also printed a booklet that discussed the economics of tobacco in Bangladesh, including the viability of alternative crops (Ahmad 1995).
- MANAS, started in the 1990s by Dr. Arup Ratan Chowdhury, a well-known dentist and singer. Its main activity is conducting school campaigns and seminars, as well as presenting programs on television.
- The National Non-Smokers' Forum, founded in 1986—the first anti-tobacco organization in Bangladesh. It publishes a quarterly newsletter and undertakes various public relations activities such as running seminars and workshops and printing informational materials.

These organizations are still active, both independently and in collaboration with BATA, whose founding is described in the next section.²

Before 1999 most of these groups focused on awareness-raising activities, particularly on health and for school-age children. What was missing was a determined effort to urge the government to pass strong tobacco control legislation, as well as the information and research needed to demonstrate the multisectoral nature of the problems of tobacco use.

The Catalyst for Change

It was a specific marketing campaign by BAT that finally provided the impetus for a concerted and courageous effort by tobacco control advocates. Even though advocates had become used to the flashy, sophisticated

2. ADHUNIK and the Bangladesh Cancer Society played an active role when BATA was first formed. As a result of internal politics, ADHUNIK is no longer active in BATA, and the Cancer Society has formally withdrawn. In April 2001 ADHUNIK announced that it was forming its own alliance, the Coalition Against Tobacco (CAT).

cigarette advertisements on television, in newspapers, and on billboards throughout the country, BAT's Voyage of Discovery campaign in the summer of 1999 was startling. The idea of sailing a yacht carrying the John Player Gold Leaf brand logo to 17 countries in 177 days caught people's imagination. The excitement was enhanced by the choice of the port of Chittagong as the final destination.

Alarming as were the billboards, newspaper advertisements, and cigarette display stands embossed with the Voyage colors and its slogan "Go for the Adventure," more worrisome were the lengthy and highly sophisticated television advertisements on the national TV station, Bangladesh TeleVision (BTV). Despite a law prohibiting BTV from carrying tobacco advertisements, the station repeatedly broadcast advertisements for the Voyage. This blatant disregard for national law in pursuit of profit, and the national fervor about the Voyage, caused a wave of unprecedented concern about tobacco control. But the concern was mixed with a sense of despair, as there seemed little that tobacco control advocates could do in the face of the wealth and power of BAT.

In July 1999 Work for a Better Bangladesh (WBB), a new organization devoted to tobacco control and urban environmental issues, organized a meeting to discuss possible responses to the Voyage campaign. Although only one other organization, the National Non-Smokers' Forum, was represented at this first meeting, the WBB was not deterred. What these tobacco control advocates lacked in wealth and power, they more than made up for in persistence. WBB staff contacted other organizations that might be interested—groups working on drug problems, development, consumer issues, and women's issues—and continued to organize meetings. Gradually attendance increased, and BATA was born. The WBB, on behalf of BATA, organized a press conference at which dignitaries, including Nurul Islam, founding president of ADHUNIK, spoke. At a seminar organized by BATA, a range of organizations presented their views, and barrister Tania Amir of the firm Law Associates offered her ideas on legal remedies that were unlikely to succeed but were worth trying in the absence of other possibilities. (Amir later founded Law and Society Trust, Bangladesh—LSTB—a member organization of BATA.)

Besides attracting advocates to the cause, BATA faced the challenge of raising funds for its activities. Most of the groups in BATA were small and had limited funds, and the larger organizations faced administrative difficulties in committing a significant amount of money for advocacy work. To overcome the hurdle, all of the organizations involved agreed to contribute small amounts; PATH Canada provided further financial assis-

tance.³ With a total of US\$3,000—in marked contrast to BAT’s annual advertising budget of US\$3.3 million—the groups moved forward with their strategy.

From September to November 1999, BATA members conducted a series of activities, with different organizations taking the lead for different events. The president of the WBB, Saifuddin Ahmed, flew to Chittagong and looked through the docking permits for the Voyage campaign. He discovered that the yacht had not obtained proper permission, having applied to dock on a visit rather than for commercial purposes. BATA members designed and posted in cities all over the country “Sinking Boat” posters comparing the Voyage to the British colonization of Bangladesh. They also organized a bicycle rally from Dhaka to Chittagong, human chains in Dhaka and Chittagong, a press conference, and other events. Tania Amir of LSTB, barrister Omar Sadat of ADHUNIK, and several other individuals involved in BATA filed a petition with the High Court seeking a stop to the promotional activities planned on the yacht’s arrival. BATA members made their voices heard, and their message was clear: the Voyage was not about adventure, glamour, or sophistication but about the efforts of a rich transnational company to hook poor Bangladeshis on expensive cigarettes.

The boat docked in Chittagong on November 21, 1999, one day after its expected arrival date. The mayor of Chittagong attended an event to greet the yacht, declaring that while cigarettes are dangerous to health, he welcomed foreign investment in Bangladesh. Almost simultaneously, the High Court issued its decision: a stay order on all promotional activities of the yacht. The concerts and other events were canceled, tickets were refunded, and a small notice was published in the paper explaining the occurrence. The yacht sailed away quietly a few days later.

When the case was reheard a few months later, the lawyer for BAT—one of the highest-ranking people in the opposition party—defended the Voyage as being not an advertisement for cigarettes but merely a generic promotion. His statement was challenged by barristers Omar Sadat and Tania Amir, who argued that the defense was absurd and pointed out the dangers of tobacco and the need for strong controls. With no laws to back up the argument against advertising (a law banning advertisements had been blocked in Parliament years before), Amir utilized the constitutional guarantee of right to life to support the case, arguing that the promotion of a product that causes serious disease and death is not consistent with the government’s mandate to support health and life.

3. PATH Canada (the acronym stands for Programme for Appropriate Technology in Health) is an NGO based in Ottawa.

The judge agreed with the arguments of Sadat and Amir and issued a decision that urged the respondents, including the government, to:

- Ban production of tobacco leaf in phases, give subsidies to tobacco farmers to produce other agricultural products, and help tobacco workers find other jobs through such means as providing vocational training
- Restrict permission and licenses for establishing tobacco factories and direct the owners to switch to other products in phases, compensating them if necessary
- Persuade owners of tobacco factories not to continue with production of tobacco products beyond a reasonable time by banning such production
- Close down the bidi factories in phases and restrict the harvesting of tobacco to produce bidis
- Discontinue advertising of tobacco products and forbid any show or program that propagates smoking beyond the period of the existing contract or agreement
- Prohibit import of tobacco “within a reasonable period” and in the meantime impose a heavy import tax; require all imports to print a statutory warning legibly in bold type in Bengali
- Ban any promotional ventures such as the Voyage of Discovery
- Ban smoking in public places.⁴

The High Court had made an astonishingly strong ruling in favor of tobacco control, and BATA had been born out of the ashes of the Voyage campaign (Efroymsen 2000a).

Power in Numbers: The Importance of BATA

Despite the victory in the High Court, the Voyage has not, in fact, disappeared from Bangladesh. Billboards still display the yacht, with the slogan changed to say “Follow the World Adventure.” But more than just the billboards serve as a reminder of the yacht’s eventful visit to Bangladesh. BATA, the alliance that was formed to fight against the Voyage, is the legacy and continues in its efforts to achieve better tobacco control policies for Bangladesh.

4. Bangladesh High Court Division Hearing on Writ Petition No. 1825 of 1999 and Writ Petition No. 4521 of 1999 in the Matter of an Application under Article 102 of the Constitution of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh; summary available on the BATA Website, <<http://bata.globalink.org>>.

A key aspect of Bangladesh's new approach to tobacco control has been to widen the debate beyond health and enlist advocates from fields other than medicine (Efroymsen 2000b). Although doctors around the world have achieved important successes in tobacco control, the exclusion of other groups has limited the effectiveness of advocacy efforts. People from fields such as law, consumer rights, and development work can bring different perspectives to the debate and additional tools to the advocacy movement, along with, potentially, a keener focus on law and policy.

Tobacco-related diseases are not considered a health priority in Bangladesh, and to focus exclusively on them would have essentially guaranteed failure in bringing about any major changes in tobacco control laws and policies. Rather than attempt to quantify the disease and death caused by tobacco, BATA focused instead on an issue of much more immediate relevance: malnutrition. As mentioned earlier, the poor of Bangladesh—as in many other countries—are much more likely to smoke than the wealthy, and the money they spend on tobacco, if used instead to purchase food, could make a significant difference in their children's nutritional status.

BATA now has 270 diverse organizations around the country in its network, as well as an international advisory board. In addition to MANAS and the National Non-Smokers' Forum, the following organizations are members:

- *Body Against Destructive Social Activities, Bangladesh (BADSA)*. An antidrug organization, founded in 1994, that regularly organizes rallies and other events to highlight the problem of tobacco use in Bangladesh.
- *Consumers' Association of Bangladesh (CAB)*. As part of its mandate to protect consumers, addresses the issue of tobacco as the most dangerous of all consumer products.
- *Dhaka Ahsania Mission*. Works in many sectors and has conducted many activities in tobacco control, including organizing (jointly with the LSTB) a discussion meeting on tobacco control law; persuading the Bangladesh Postal Department to produce a stamp and other materials celebrating World No Tobacco Day; organizing discussion meetings throughout the country; running a program to establish smoke-free schools; and printing and distributing stickers and posters.
- *Ghas Phul Nodi*. An antidrug organization; conducts various activities to draw attention to the problems of tobacco use.
- *Institute of Allergy and Clinical Immunology, Bangladesh (IACIB)*. One of BATA's newest members; recently carried out a survey of ricksha pullers and their tobacco use habits and is conducting awareness programs.

- *Law and Society Trust, Bangladesh (LSTB)*. A key party in obtaining the High Court decision against BAT. Tania Amir of the LSTB has been active in the Intergovernmental Negotiating Body (INB) meetings for the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) and in revising legislation for submission to the government. She is a member of the law-drafting committee of the Ministry of Health.
- *MANOBIK (Madok Drabya-O-Nesha Birodi Council [Antidrug Council])*. An antidrug association that has recently taken on tobacco control as a major issue. Its activities include a sit-in protest in front of the National Press Club in favor of higher taxes on tobacco products and organization of rallies and discussion meetings.
- *Pratyasha*. An antidrug organization that conducts awareness campaigns on tobacco.
- *Welfare Association for Cancer Care (WACC)*. Currently focuses on involving more organizations in addressing women's and children's issues with respect to tobacco control. It has produced various materials addressing women's tobacco use, as well as a book on tobacco and cancer that highlights the human face of tobacco-related illness.
- *Work for a Better Bangladesh (WBB)*. The WBB, as BATA's secretariat, plays a key role in coordinating BATA events. It has conducted a series of tobacco control training workshops throughout the country. It coproduced, with PATH Canada, the "Hungry for Tobacco" report and two PATH Canada publications: a how-to guide for tobacco control and a guide to tobacco control law. The WBB has issued and is distributing, through BATA, a booklet of advice on quitting smoking, and it has produced various leaflets, stickers, and posters. Saifuddin Ahmed, WBB president and coordinator for BATA, has attended INB meetings, is active in the Framework Convention Alliance (a coalition of NGOs working for a strong FCTC), and sits on the law-drafting committee of the Ministry of Health.
- *Young Power in Social Action (YPSA)*. Based in Chittagong; had a critical role in organizing events to protest the landing of the Voyage of Discovery yacht in Chittagong port. With the WBB, it also organized a workshop in Chittagong, and it is active in encouraging local organizations to work on tobacco control.

The BATA member organizations listed here are NGOs registered with the government of Bangladesh. With the exception of the YPSA, all are based in Dhaka. Most are small organizations with a flexible structure that facilitates their involvement in the politically sensitive area of advocacy.

BATA's mission is to:

- Contribute to the health and well-being of Bangladeshis by reducing tobacco consumption

- Reduce the damage to health, the environment, households, and the national economy from tobacco consumption
- Educate the public and policymakers about the dangers of tobacco
- Help strengthen the nation's tobacco control policies and legislation
- Conduct research to learn more about tobacco use and its effects, particularly its economic impact
- Raise awareness among development organizations about the importance of tobacco control and encourage more groups to become involved
- Continue to be a strong, united force in tobacco control locally, nationally, and internationally.

The alliance has been active since its inception in leading and coordinating activities pertaining to education, awareness raising, training, advocacy, research, and coordination with government and NGOs on both the national and the international levels. These activities are an example of how NGOs can influence policy and build coalitions, as long as the members are willing to suspend an interest in exercising control and assuming leadership in order to work cooperatively. The following are just some examples of activities that BATA has championed since its founding in 1999:

- *Advocacy.* BATA has regularly held events calling for legislative changes, including a signature campaign in favor of nonsmoking carriages on trains and protests calling for higher tobacco taxes and an end to tobacco advertising. BATA is also urging the government to negotiate for and sign a strong Framework Convention on Tobacco Control.
- *Draft legislation.* After compiling laws from various countries, BATA helped draft a comprehensive tobacco control law which, as of March 2003, was still being discussed in parliamentary committees and is yet to be voted on by Parliament. The draft law bans advertising (except at point of sale), mandates pictorial warnings on cigarette packs, and prohibits smoking in many public places. BATA is working to strengthen the provisions and to ensure that the law is not weakened by Parliament.
- *Public education.* BATA members produce a range of materials, including posters, stickers, and pamphlets, to educate the public about the dangers to health, economics, and appearance from tobacco use and about how to quit smoking.
- *Public mobilization.* BATA encourages the public to take a stand against tobacco promotion and use. Mobilization activities include rallies and marches for the WHO's South-East Asian Anti-Tobacco (SEAAT) Flame for Freedom from Tobacco campaign in which, in 2000, a torch symbolizing the tobacco control movement traveled throughout South and

Southeast Asia. BATA has also held workshops, seminars, and press conferences on tobacco control themes.

- *Research.* BATA has conducted studies on the effect of tobacco use on poverty and has carried out research on demand for a smoke-free bus service. It has also run an analysis of BAT's "Youth Smoking Prevention Campaign," which included use of focus groups and a questionnaire.
- *International activities.* BATA has attended and made presentations at various international workshops and conferences, including regional meetings in India and Thailand, the People's Health Assembly, various WHO meetings, and the 11th World Conference on Tobacco or Health. Fifteen of its member organizations have made submissions to the WHO expressing support for a strong FCTC, and BATA is an active participant in the Framework Convention Alliance.

By broadening the base of support for tobacco control, BATA hopes to build a much stronger movement for tobacco control advocacy. With that in mind, the WBB, with financial support from the American Cancer Society and technical support from PATH Canada, is holding a series of workshops around the country for NGOs and the media on tobacco control. The workshops emphasize that tobacco is a multisectoral issue, one that touches on the environment, poverty, human rights, religion, and many other areas, as well as health. In the workshops the participants, mostly from small local NGOs, engage in small-group discussions to plan activities and create work plans. The WBB hopes in the future to provide small grants for these NGOs to encourage them to put some of their ideas into practice.

Tobacco control policy cannot be successfully formulated or implemented unless a broad base of NGOs around the country actively supports it. Effective support for a large NGO network is in turn contingent upon raising awareness among NGOs about the importance of tobacco control and their capacity to become effective advocates. In BATA's case, technical and financial support from American and Canadian agencies has been essential in enhancing the capacity of local NGOs to support the government and promote good policies for tobacco control.

The Politics of Policymaking

Bangladesh's democracy does not always operate smoothly. Rather than discussing issues in Parliament, the opposition party sometimes stages walkouts and then protests if decisions are made in members' absence. The most common form of protest is a *hartal* (general strike), in which a party or a coalition of parties asks people to stay home, usually from dawn to dusk. Reported cases of corruption and bribery within the government

system further undermine the democratic process. These characteristics, coupled with the influence that tobacco companies wield, make tobacco control efforts difficult.

Despite all the vagaries of Bangladeshi politics, the government holds most of the solutions to the problem of tobacco use. Without strong laws and high tobacco taxes, there is little that organizations and individuals can do. This should not be used as an excuse to accept defeat; rather, it should be a reminder to everyone working in the field of tobacco control of the importance of continuing advocacy work.

Bangladesh's existing laws on tobacco control are weak. Advertising is banned on state-controlled media (BTV and radio) but is allowed everywhere else, including on local private and satellite television stations, in newspapers and magazines, and on billboards. Sponsorship of rock concerts by BAT (e.g., Benson & Hedges Star Search) is common, and despite the claim that youths under 18 are not admitted, no such rules appear to be followed (WBB and PATH Canada 2001). In addition, airing the programs on television effectively guarantees a young audience. One national daily newspaper, *Bhorer Kagoj*, voluntarily refuses to run tobacco advertisements (Simpson 1998), but other newspapers frequently run half-page, full-color advertisements for cigarettes. Billboards, storefront signs, cigarette display cases, and other forms of advertising are widespread throughout the country.

Smoking is banned in hospitals and some other premises, but these prohibitions are largely ignored. Operators of many air-conditioned buses and some owners of air-conditioned restaurants voluntarily forbid smoking. Biman, the national airline, prohibited smoking on domestic flights years ago, and in April 2001 it extended the ban to all international flights.

Warnings on tobacco products are limited to cigarette packs and consist of one weak statement, in Bengali and in small type, on the side of the pack. None of the other tobacco products available on the market are required to carry a warning.

The government is currently in the lengthy process of revising its tobacco control laws and drafting new ones. Pressure to do so came largely from the High Court's decision following the Voyage of Discovery case. If the new draft law under consideration is passed in its present form, it will be an enormous improvement and will provide a strong legislative base for better tobacco control in Bangladesh. Advocates continue to work to convince policymakers of the need for a comprehensive ban on promotions, strong and clearly visible warnings on all tobacco products, and protection of nonsmokers, among other measures.

BATA has developed a close working relationship with the government on the basis of simple principles appropriate to the Bangladeshi cultural

environment, such as working with the government, rather than against it, and providing assistance to the government in carrying out its programs where possible. BATA members generally regard confrontational tactics as counterproductive in dealing with the government. In their view, the key to success in Bangladesh lies in maintaining a strong, close working relationship with the government and thus being able to form a constructive relationship with policymakers—an essential ingredient of effective tobacco control policies. Such a relationship does not preclude criticizing government policies or advocating strongly for change; rather, it involves a constructive attitude toward working with policymakers, based on mutual respect.

BATA tries to focus on providing services to the government—for example, designing stickers and posters and helping to organize government events. Where necessary, this includes providing services gratis and without taking credit. In return, the government is open to collaboration. Although this process means extra work for tobacco advocates, the payoff can be significant in developing and maintaining a strong relationship with the government.

Some of the ways in which BATA has sought to provide support for the government include:

- Organizing activities for WHO's Flame for Freedom from Tobacco campaign.
- Designing posters and organizing rallies for World No Tobacco Day.
- Briefing the government on the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control. This gave delegates the information they needed to participate in meetings and allowed BATA to present its view of the proposed language for the FCTC during the government negotiations.

The relationship between BATA and the government has been close and successful enough that BATA received the WHO's Tobacco Free World Award in 2001 at the recommendation of the government. In addition, two members of BATA—Tania Amir of the LSTB and Saifuddin Ahmed of the WBB—have been invited to sit on the Health Ministry's law-drafting committee and to participate directly in the process of drafting new legislation. In some respects BATA members now serve as a liaison between other BATA organizations and the government, soliciting ideas from members on what should go into the laws and what language should be used. The battle will not end with the passage of new laws: BATA members will also have a critical role to play in monitoring the behavior of the tobacco companies and ensuring enforcement of the laws.

Lessons Learned

Despite the progress that has been made, challenges remain. Among them are funding, the struggle to build the political will necessary for change and to establish tobacco control as a priority for the country, the construction of lasting alliances, and the continuing strength of the opposition. But important lessons have been learned in each of these areas.

Obtaining Funds

Important work such as advocacy for new laws can be done even with limited funding. Some of the strongest laws in other countries were passed when tobacco control movements had relatively little funding, as in South Africa and Thailand. But although ample funding does not guarantee success, it is difficult to do the work with *no* funding; critical tasks such as law enforcement and surveillance of the epidemic to measure progress can be expensive. Certain assets that are taken for granted in developed countries—a steady power supply, phone lines, computers, e-mail and Web access, and a good command of English—are in short supply in many developing countries. Such comparatively simple matters as finding basic information to back up a proposal for new laws, a space in which to hold meetings, and the money to print documents can be major obstacles. Lack of full-time staff devoted to tobacco control—and with access to resources—can seriously undermine efforts. From the perspective of tobacco control advocates, the ideal source of funding is a dedicated tax on tobacco, but advocacy groups need immediate funding to sustain the (perhaps lengthy) lobbying effort needed to get such a tax passed. Large organizations that have sufficient funds to conduct the work may shy away from advocacy, preferring less controversial areas such as school-based programs.

One way of overcoming lack of funds is through partnerships with local NGOs or with institutions in developed countries. To help provide at least minimal operating funds, PATH Canada offered the WBB some startup funding, shared office space, and, perhaps more important, ongoing technical input. PATH Canada's support enabled the WBB to focus on tobacco control work, including the building of BATA, rather than on seeking funds. The relationship also gave the WBB the assurance that small, necessary expenses could be met, such as those involved in holding a press conference and establishing computer and e-mail links for global networking. The technical assistance has been valuable in gathering evidence to support arguments for tobacco control. It enabled the WBB to provide the essential foundation and minimum operating costs for BATA, with other organizations contributing some funds and large amounts of time and expertise.

Having created an excellent track record in its first year of work, BATA was able to gain supplementary funding in the following forms:

- Three small one-year grants from the American Cancer Society to three BATA member organizations—the LSTB, to support legal advocacy; the Welfare Association for Cancer Care, to work on issues affecting women and children; and the WBB, to strengthen BATA through divisional workshops and printed materials
- A two-year grant from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) to PATH Canada, the WBB, and BATA to develop and print materials, hold workshops, develop the capacity of WBB and BATA staff, and design and air counteradvertising.

In addition to these specific grants, BATA members have received funding from the WHO, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Canadian Cancer Society, and other groups to attend workshops, meetings, and conferences. Because dependence on external funding is a concern, BATA is seeking to increase contributions from its member organizations and to finance some of its publications by accepting advertising.

Much work can be done with little money if resources are used wisely. Writing letters, holding meetings, organizing public demonstrations, and talking to politicians cost little. Rather than waiting for funds to materialize, it is best to make a start, utilizing existing resources. If the work is successful, it will be easier to find funding in the future.

Creating Political Will and Working with the Media

It is often said that policy change cannot occur without political will. This statement seems to imply that political will is something innate rather than created—a dangerously passive approach to advocacy. Although that may sometimes be the case, a critical part of tobacco control is to create the will to make the changes. And in a democratic government, this often means convincing politicians that they will gain more votes if they are seen to support tobacco control.

How does one go about generating political will?

- *Educate and involve the public.* A public unaware of the problems associated with tobacco use and of the role the tobacco industry plays in blocking legislation will not put pressure on politicians for change. The public needs to know not only that tobacco is harmful but also what role the tobacco industry plays in opposing policies designed to reduce tobacco use. Involving the public includes taking the lead in activities such as letter-writing campaigns, petitions, and public demonstrations.

- *Educate politicians.* Politicians need to know how the tobacco industry may be trying to manipulate them through public relations activities and lobbying (e.g., suggesting that taxes be lowered to reduce smuggling when in fact the tobacco company itself has been shown to be involved in smuggling in several court cases). They need to understand the implications of tobacco use on health and the economy. And they need to know that activists will not keep quiet. Well-intentioned but ill-informed politicians can be educated to support tobacco control, and others can be shamed into doing so.
- *Show politicians that there is strong public demand for tobacco control.* Creating visible support for the issue—through public demonstrations, editorials, letters to the editor, and so on—can help persuade politicians that they will gain more by doing as the public wants than by pleasing their friends in the industry.

The media are critical to the creation of political will. Given the low budgets of most tobacco control programs around the world, the use of free media coverage is essential. One of the successes of tobacco control work in Bangladesh has been the ability to gain media attention. Activities have included:

- Holding press conferences.
- Inviting the media to seminars and workshops.
- Organizing rallies, human chains, and other protests, often in front of the National Press Club.
- Writing letters to the editor.
- Holding discussions with the newspaper *Bhorer Kagoj* that led to the publication of color messages about tobacco every day during the month of May, free of charge.
- Maintaining positive relations with the press. For instance, the *Economic Times*, a weekly newspaper on economic issues, frequently carries news releases provided by BATA.

It is possible that the willingness of the media to report on tobacco control topics, including the dangers of tobacco use, is in inverse proportion to the amount of income they gain from tobacco advertisements, although no study on this has been done in Bangladesh. The authors' subjective observation is that newspapers such as *Bhorer Kagoj*, with no tobacco advertisements, and *The Observer*, with only sporadic ones, devote more attention to tobacco-related problems than do newspapers that regularly run tobacco advertisements.

The media in many countries gain significant income from tobacco advertising, but there are always some individuals and institutions that

are willing to help prevent disease and death from tobacco use, that envision a more effective role for the government in tobacco control, and that are prepared to provide support gratis. Building relationships with the press often pays off in free media coverage. We do not know what is possible until we try.

Competing Priorities

In many low-income countries there is a general feeling that tobacco control is an issue for rich countries that have the “luxury” of being able to worry about chronic diseases, while low-income countries have to concentrate on infectious disease, malnutrition, access to clean water, and the like. Framing the tobacco problem only in terms of cancer, or even only in terms of health, adds to this perception. Talking about the number of deaths likely to result from tobacco use can be ineffective, as many such deaths are likely to occur late in life. Where life expectancy is low, mortality from cancer and heart disease is not likely to be considered a priority, no matter how significant it may in fact be.

While never forgetting that tobacco is primarily a health issue, tobacco control advocates in Bangladesh have tried to stress that the health problems arise not only from disease but also from the opportunity costs involved in spending money on an addictive and harmful substance rather than on food or other basic needs. The argument is most appropriate when applied to transnational tobacco companies whose products are essentially unaffordable for most of the population yet are so widely advertised that they are likely to become aspirational goods, even at the cost of a large portion of family income. Repositioning tobacco use as an issue of poverty, nutrition, and human rights can gain the attention and support needed to deal with an entirely preventable epidemic.

It is important to be innovative in framing the tobacco control issue and to use concepts appropriate to the setting. In some areas the focus might best be on the environmental damage resulting from tobacco cultivation and curing; in others, on the labor issues involved in tobacco production. Tobacco control advocates should be flexible enough to present the issue in a way that broadens support and to obtain or develop the knowledge base on which to build their efforts and claims.

Maintaining a Strong Alliance

Alliances can be powerful tools, but they are often fraught with problems. It can be difficult to maintain a balance between attending to the organizational and relationship issues that have to be addressed to keep the alliance functioning and staying focused on the actual work of tobacco

control. Bangladesh has experienced mixed success in this area: although BATA is strong and continues to grow, it has not been able to maintain the involvement of all the key players.

Working within a coalition has many advantages:

- The coalition can draw on the strengths of individual members, giving it access to a base of skills, experience, and connections that would be hard to find in any single organization.
- A coalition increases the number of voices speaking out and thus the level of attention to the issue.
- A coalition can be a forum for sharing ideas and communicating about individual actions so that even when joint organizing does not occur, work is more coordinated and groups do not unnecessarily duplicate each other's efforts.
- A coalition can, when it functions well, be an energizing force, where individual members gain ideas and motivation from each other and all face the work with greater eagerness.

But maintaining a strong and active coalition is difficult. Challenges can arise if individuals focus on personal gains and prestige more than on group plans or institutional objectives, if there is conflict over the best approach to shared work, and if personal conflicts or animosity arise. In such cases, creating smaller working groups or committees may be the way to continue building the group's effectiveness.

In Bangladesh the formation of an alliance was critical to the successes achieved. A balance is always needed between the administrative, organizational, and personal tasks needed to keep individual members satisfied and a focus on the work at hand. There is no such thing as a "perfect" coalition, but if the group can achieve more than was previously possible, without impossibly high inputs of time and other resources, then it can be described as successful. While the building of an alliance or coalition is one way to increase effectiveness in tobacco control, by no means should it come at an excessive cost in money, time, or energy.

Standing Up to the Opposition

The task of tobacco control often—and understandably—appears daunting. What can a few individuals or organizations working in the interest of public health do when faced with the power of one or several transnational tobacco companies, with their enormous financial resources and political connections? At least David and Goliath were standing on the same field; the tobacco industry may have access to lawmakers and other officials that tobacco control advocates can only guess at and wish for.

It is unrealistic to expect that the task will be simple. There will always be times of discouragement. It is important to keep a sense of perspective and to remember that even in the countries that boast the greatest successes in tobacco control, about a quarter of the population still smokes; in many other countries, the percentage is far higher and continues to rise.

Every time a tobacco company launches a new public relations campaign, or a government cuts tobacco taxes or refuses to pass new legislation or passes legislation drafted by the tobacco industry itself, there is a need for advocates to take stock. Yes, the tobacco industry is a powerful adversary, and yes, the companies have vast financial resources, but they are also trading in a deadly and addictive product that most of the population does not consume and that most addicted users wish they could stop using. The victories achieved by tobacco control advocates and policymakers are almost always hard-fought. There are plenty of setbacks along the way, and a long way farther to go, but however great the power of might, even greater is the power of right.

A powerful opponent can sometimes provide motivation. BATA was formed during the struggle against BAT over the Voyage of Discovery, and other work was inspired by BAT's launch of its "Youth Smoking Prevention Campaign." Policymakers and advocates, working together, will be able to curb BAT's ability to advertise, thus narrowing the gap between the tobacco industry's reach and BATA's. The only sure path to defeat is to accept it without a struggle.

Conclusion

Most of the story of tobacco control in Bangladesh is still unwritten, and events continue to unfold. It remains to be seen whether the tobacco control movement will be sufficiently powerful and proactive to counter industry tactics and persuade the government to take strong measures to control tobacco. The tobacco industry is a mighty force in Bangladesh, as elsewhere, and it will be difficult to maintain a spotlight on tobacco in the face of so many competing causes of disease and ill health. But if the progress made over the past few years is any indication of the future, the many organizations and individuals working for tobacco control in Bangladesh have good reason to be optimistic.

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