
ARTICLE REVIEW

Plain Packaging and Pictorial Warning in Asia Countries: Where are We?

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ABSTRACT

Worldwide, around 8 million people die yearly due to tobacco usage. Cigarette smoking is the most popular form of tobacco usage. Smoking has linked to many detrimental health effects among adults and adolescents. Recognising the burden of smoking, World Health Organization have implemented various tobacco control strategies under the Framework Convention of Tobacco Control and mPOWER. This includes implementation of plain packaging and pictorial warning. In Asia, only Thailand, Singapore, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Israel have implemented plain cigarette pack. However, some countries have made progress to implement plain cigarette pack. Although some countries have not implemented plain pack, implementation of larger pictorial warning serve as a pathway for implementation of plain packaging. Countries with pictorial warning on cigarette pack should ensure it covers at least 50% of pack. Timor Leste has the largest pictorial warning on cigarette pack in the world. In conclusion, only 5 countries in Asia have implemented plain pack and some countries in this region are yet to implement size of pictorial warning according to requirement of World Health Organization. All countries should target to implement standardized pack to denormalise tobacco usage.

Keywords Tobacco - Plain packaging - Cigarette – Asia - pictorial warning.

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most preventable cause of death is diseases caused by tobacco usage.^{1,2} About 1 in 5 adults worldwide smoke tobacco. Smoking cigarette is the most popular form of usage of tobacco use worldwide.¹ Other form of usage of tobacco includes waterpipe tobacco, smokeless tobacco products, cigars, cigarillos, roll-your-own tobacco, pipe tobacco, bidis and kreteks. Despite how tobacco is used, its usage causes addiction and detrimental health effects.^{2,3} In general, smoking damages nearly every organ of the body, causes many diseases, and impairs the health of smokers.⁴ The usage of tobacco is linked to many adverse health effects such as heart disease, stroke, cardiovascular disease, respiratory disease, and cancer.⁴ Tobacco use is among adolescence linked to other high risk behavior which includes bullying, early and unprotected sex, poor life satisfaction, high levels of alcohol consumption and violence.^{5,6} Some studies have linked smoking to drug abuse.^{7,8}

Recognizing the burden of tobacco usage, World Health Organization (WHO) have implemented various tobacco control strategies under the Framework Convention of Tobacco Control (FCTC).⁹ FCTC uses evidenced-based findings to ensures all people receive the highest standard of health. The convention came into force on 27 February 2005 and currently there are 182 countries in this convention which includes more than 90% of the world population.¹⁰ The main aim of this convention is to protect current and future generation from the detrimental outcomes of tobacco use in the scope of health, social, economic and environment.¹¹ mPOWER was introduced by WHO in 2008 which was in line with WHO FCTC.¹² FCTC have proposed the implementation of plain packaging and pictorial warning, however the strategies of mPOWER focusing on implementation of pictorial warning.¹³⁻¹⁵

There are many studies which has been done which indicates the effectiveness of plain pack and pictorial warning. According to WHO, plain pack acts to reduce the appeal of tobacco products and increases the visibility and effectiveness of health warning.¹⁵ Plain packaging increases negative feelings of non-smokers to initiate smoking and among smokers, motivates quit attempts and reduces consumption.^{16,17} This can be attributed to the unattractive colour of plain pack and removal of branding on plain pack. In a study done in Thailand, the unattractive colour of plain pack of dark olive evoked feelings of not wanting to buy plain cigarette pack.¹⁸ This was enforced by absence of branding which makes the packaging unattractive.

Plain packaging and pictorial warning independently and synergistically acts alter smoking behaviour among non-smokers.¹⁹ In comparison to text warning, implementation of pictorial warning is more effective to reduce/quit smoking and it to

increase support for plain packaging.²⁰ Pictorial warning also is crucial to deliver its message especially for countries with low literacy rates and for younger smokers.²¹ Larger pictorial health warning are more effective.²² In a study done in Sri Lanka, size of pictorial warning of 80% increases knowledge about the dangers of smoking among both smokers and non-smokers, encourage more conversation with others about the harm of smoking especially among non-smokers and increase quitting among smokers.²³ In another study in Thailand, 85% graphic health warning significantly increased fear arousal, and intention not to smoke, among non-smokers.²⁴

The effectiveness of plain cigarette packaging can be proven by post-implementation of plain packaging in certain countries, sales of cigarettes has reduced about 67 million units (sticks) per month, representing around 7.5% of the market.²⁴

Worldwide, Australia was the first country to implement plain packaging on 1st December 2012.¹⁵ This was followed by France and United Kingdom in 2017, New Zealand, Norway and Ireland in 2018 and Uruguay in 2019.²⁵ Laws of plain packaging are passed but awaiting into force in Romania and Mauritius.²⁶ Meanwhile, other countries such as Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Panama and South Africa, the legislation is still considered by Parliament. Worldwide, Canada was the first country to adopt pictorial warnings in 2011 and since then 118 countries have mandated pictorial warnings.²²

However, little is known about the implementation of plain pack and pictorial warning in Asia countries and to the researcher's knowledge, there are no reviews done regarding this topic. Hence, this review aims to determine the progress of implementation of plain packaging, implementation of pictorial warning and size of pictorial warning in Asia countries. Implementation of plain packaging and pictorial warning is one of the strategies to assist the countries to achieve the target of WHO of Tobacco End Game.

WHO FCTC and mPOWER Strategy on Plain Packaging and Pictorial Warning

The following describes various guidelines on plain packaging and pictorial warning by WHO FCTC and mPOWER. Guidelines for execution of Articles 11 (Packaging and labelling of tobacco products) and Article 13 (Tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship) in FCTC includes the implementation of plain packaging of tobacco product.¹⁵

Under Article 11, it is stated that parties should implement measure to inhibit the use of logos, brand image, colours or promotion on packaging and brand names should be in a uniform colour and font.¹³ This is in line with the implementation of plain packaging. Plain packaging removes all

marketing elements, including brand, colours, and logos.²⁷ All cigarette packaging is mandated to be a

standardised colour and displays only a brand name in a standard font style and format. (Fig 1)

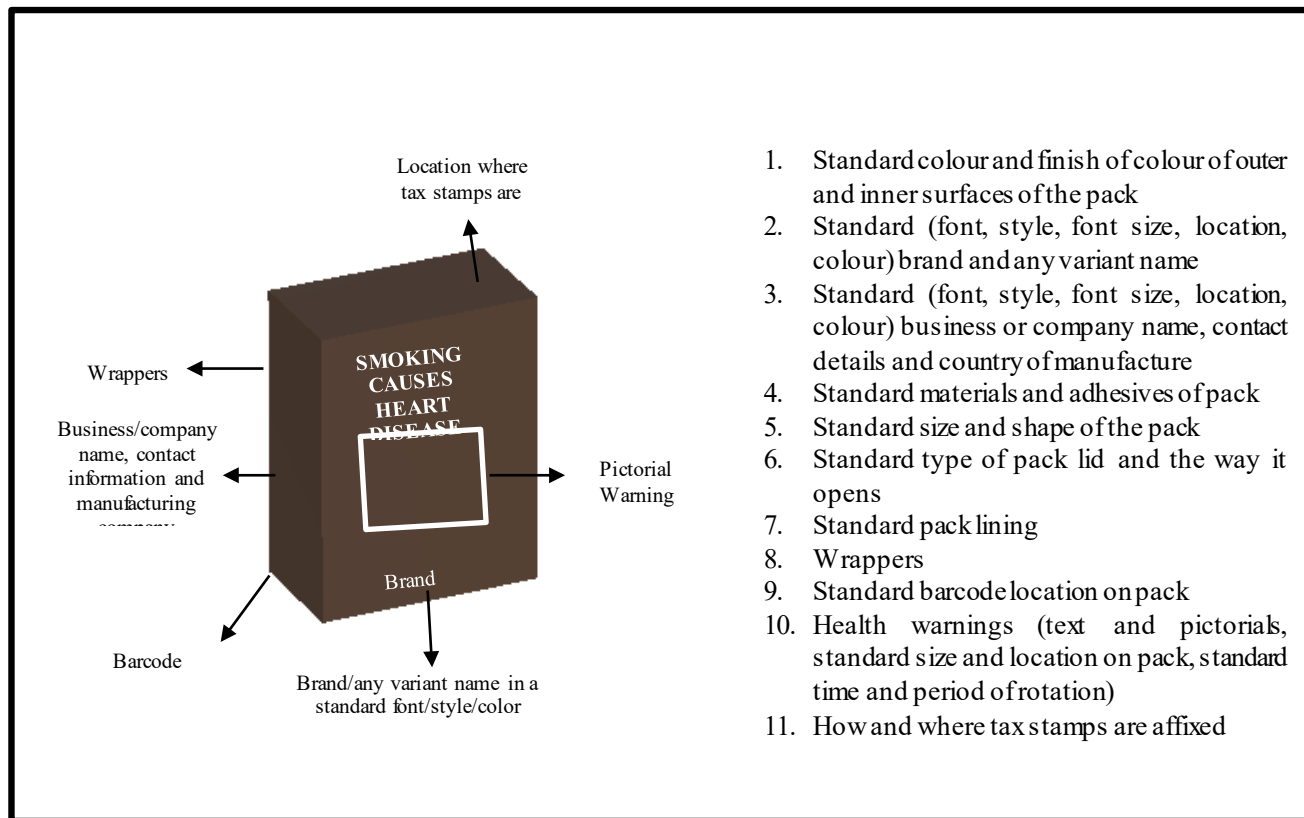


Figure 1 Criteria of plain pack¹⁵

Update on Countries in Asia Regarding Plain Cigarette Packaging Implementation
 Since there are many countries in Asia, the researcher has divided this update into Central Asia, East Asia, South Asia, South-East Asia and Western

Asia for convenience²⁸ Table 1 shows the implementation of cigarette plain packaging and pictorial warning, and Table 2 shows the details of countries which have implemented plain pack.

Table 1 Plain Cigarette Packaging and Pictorial Warning Policy in Asia

| Country | Implementation of Plain Cigarette Pack (Yes/No/In Progress*) | Are pictorial warnings required on cigarette pack? | Size of Warning on Cigarette Pack (front%/back%) |
|--------------|--|--|--|
| Central Asia | | | |
| Turkmenistan | No | Yes | 65/65 |
| Kyrgyzstan | No | Yes | 50/50 |
| Kazakhstan | No | Yes | 50/50 |
| Tajikistan | No | No | 75/75 |
| Uzbekistan | No | No | 40/40 |
| South Asia | | | |
| Nepal | No | Yes | 90/90 |
| India | In Progress | Yes | 85/85 |
| Sri Lanka | In Progress | Yes | 80/80 |
| Pakistan | No | Yes | 60/60 |
| Bangladesh | No | Yes | 50/50 |
| Maldives | No | No | 30/30* |
| Afghanistan | No | No | Not specified |
| Bhutan | No | No | Not specified |

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| | | East Asia | | |
|--|-------------|-----------------|--|---|
| Hong Kong | No | Yes | | 85/85 |
| Mongolia | No | Yes | | 65/65 |
| South Korea (Republic of Korea) | In progress | Yes | | 50/50 |
| Macau | No | Yes | | 50/50 |
| Taiwan | In progress | Yes | | 35/35 |
| China | No | No | | 35/35 |
| Japan | No | No | | 30/30 |
| North Korea (Democratic People's Republic of Korea) | No | No | | Size not specified. The law does not mention a minimum percentage, however textual warnings on 30% of the front pack are implemented in the country |
| | | South-East Asia | | |
| Thailand | Yes | Yes | | 85/85 |
| Singapore | Yes | Yes | | 75/75 |
| Timor Leste | No | Yes | | 85/100 |
| Brunei | No | Yes | | 75/75 |
| Laos | No | Yes | | 75/75 |
| Myanmar | No | Yes | | 75/75 |
| Cambodia | No | Yes | | 55/55 |
| Malaysia | In progress | Yes | | 50/60 |
| Philippines | In progress | Yes | | 50/50 |
| Vietnam | No | Yes | | 50/50 |
| Indonesia | In progress | Yes | | 40/40 |
| | | Western Asia | | |
| Turkey | Yes | Yes | | 85/85 |
| Saudi Arabia | Yes* | Yes | | 65/65 |
| Israel | Yes | No | | 65/65 |
| Cyprus | No | Yes | | 65/65 |
| Georgia | In progress | Yes | | 65/65 |
| Armenia | In progress | Yes | | 50/50 |
| Iran | No | Yes | | 50/50 |
| Kuwait | No | Yes | | 50/50 |
| Bahrain | No | Yes | | 50/50 |
| Qatar | No | Yes | | 50/50 |
| Jordan | No | Yes | | 40/40 |
| Lebanon | No | No | | 40/40 |
| Iraq | No | Yes | | 30/30 |
| Azerbaijan | No | No | | 30/30 |
| Syria | No | No | | 30/0 |
| Palestine | No | No | | 20/0 |

Table 2 Timeline and Challenges for Implementation of Plain Packaging

| Country | Date of Implementation of Plain Pack for Manufacturers | Date of Implementation of Plain Pack for Retailers |
|--------------|--|--|
| Thailand | 10 September 2019 | 8 December 2019 |
| Saudi Arabia | 23 August 2019* | 1 st January 2020 |
| Turkey | 5 th July 2019 | 5 th January 2020 |
| Israel | 8 th January 2020 | 8 th January 2020 |
| Singapore | 1 July 2020 | 1 July 2020 |

*Date for importers

Central Asia
None of the countries in Central Asia have implemented plain cigarette pack²⁹⁻³³ No literature

was found regarding the progress or decision of government to implementation of plain pack in these countries. In the region, only two countries have not

implemented graphic warning on cigarette pack.²⁹⁻³³ However, Tajikistan is in the process of finalizing picture-based warning requirements.³⁴ Uzbekistan is inferior from other countries in this region where only text warning is mandated, and the standards is below the WHO requirement (WHO requirement at least 50%).²⁹⁻³³

South Asia

In South Asia, no countries have implemented plain packaging.³⁵⁻⁴² However, certain countries have a greater progress in implementation of plain packaging. In Sri Lanka plain packaging proposal has been approved by cabinet on April 10, 2018.⁴³ ⁴⁴ In India, amendment was sought in the Cigarettes and Other Tobacco Products Act (COTPA) and in to include plain packaging of tobacco products. Experts in tobacco control from Australia and India join forces to produce evidence on the feasibility of plain pack in India.^{45, 46}

Nepal has one of largest graphic warning in the world where it covers 90% of tobacco pack which was even larger than Australia (Plain pack in Australia covers 82.5% of the pack).^{46, 47} Many countries in this Asia region taken steps to implement pictorial warning with at least 50% coverage on cigarette pack size except Maldives (still uses text warning with 30% coverage), Bhutan (where the tobacco manufacturing is banned, no pictorial warning requirement and no specified warning size for imported products) and Afghanistan (no pictorial warning requirement and no specified warning size).³⁵⁻⁴² In Afghanistan, in 2016, pictorial warnings were approved but revised law in 2018 removed the requirement of pictorial label and 50% coverage.⁴⁸

East Asia

There are no countries in East Asia which has implemented plain packaging.⁴⁹⁻⁵⁶ Only a few countries in this region have made some progress in the pathway of implementation of plain packaging. In Taiwan, a draft (Tobacco Hazards Prevention Act Amendment Bill) was made for plain tobacco packaging in 2017.⁴⁴ In 2019, the ministry in South Korea expressed its intention to implement plain pack.

In comparison to other countries in this region, countries such as China, North Korea, and Japan are still using text warning on cigarette packs.⁵²⁻⁵⁹ The size of warning is China, Japan and Taiwan does not meet with 50% requirement of WHO. Surprisingly, Japan and North Korea is most inferior among all countries where it has not yet implemented pictorial health warning and the size text of warning is 30%.⁵²⁻⁵⁹ Evidence from International Tobacco Control project China suggests implementation of pictorial health warning.⁶⁰

South-East Asia

In this region, there are two countries which have implemented plain packaging.⁶¹⁻⁷¹ Thailand was the first country in Asia and first middle-income country to implement plain packaging.⁷² The regulations for plain packaging were officially gazette on 14 December 2018 and came into force on 12 September 2019. Specifically, 10 September 2019 was the date of implementation for manufacturers and 8 December 2019 was the date of implementation of retailers.⁴⁴ The regulations apply to all tobacco products and allows a 90-phase phase-out for old stock.

Singapore is the next country in this region to implement plain packaging. In March 2019, the revisions which was made to the Tobacco Act (Control of Advertisements and Sale) was approved and subsequently the Ministry of Health introduced a subsidiary legislation for implementation of standardized packaging.⁷³ The Tobacco Regulations 2019 (Control of Advertisements and Sale) (Appearance, Packaging and Labelling) "SP Regulations" was published on 1 July 2019 came into force on 1 July 2020 for manufacturers and retailers.^{44, 73}

There are some countries in this region which has made some progress in the pathway of implementation of plain packaging. In Malaysia, in February 2019 the Deputy Health Minister expressed the consideration for implementing of plain packaging.²⁵ Another source stated that the implementation of plain pack in Malaysia is expected not be earlier than 2025.⁷⁴ In Indonesia, the minister of Health is urging the government to follow Australia footsteps of plain packaging.⁷⁵ In Philippines, a bill has been filed which entails all the locally produced and imported tobacco products adopt the usage of plain pack.⁷⁶

In comparison to other Asian regions, South-East Asia is the only region where all the countries have implemented pictorial warning.^{63-71, 77, 78} Although Timor-Leste have not implemented plain pack, this country has made incredible progress in the implementation of plain pack.⁷⁹ It has the largest average pictorial warning on tobacco pack (92.5%) worldwide and many restrictions of cigarette pack. This includes compulsory pack color aluminum grey, a brand name sized 15% (in white color) and brand name may not send any message about tobacco product. This restriction does not comply with the concept of plain packaging since, the brand name can be in a stylized font and the logo is still allowed. All the countries in this region also adhered to WHO standards of 50% size warning except Indonesia.^{63-71, 77, 78}

Western Asia

In this region, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Israel has implemented plain packaging.⁸⁰⁻⁹⁵ Saudi Arabia is the first country in this region to implement plain

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packaging. In November 2018, the tobacco legislation and regulation were updated specifically regarding the tobacco package labelling.⁹⁶ One month later, the Plain Packaging Standards for Tobacco products was approved and applies to all tobacco products. From 23 August 2019 onwards, all the tobacco products imported need to be in plain pack. For retailers, date of implementation of plain tobacco pack was from 1st January 2020 onwards.⁴⁴

In Turkey, in December 2018 the law adopted provisions for tobacco plain pack (includes all tobacco products) and comprehensive regulations were adopted in March 2019. The official date for implementation of plain pack among manufacturers was 5th July 2019 and 5th January 2020 marks the date for retailers.^{44, 74} Israel is another country which has implemented plain packaging on this region for all manufacturers and retailers since 8th January 2020. In December 2018, the Parliament legislation which is related to plain packaging was approved.⁹⁷ Similar to Australia, the color of this packaging is pantone 448c and text warning which covers 65% of pack for cigarettes (From 01/2020).⁹⁷

Only Georgia and Armenia have made some progress towards implementation of plain pack. In Georgia, the president has signed amending law for the implementation of plain pack in May 2017.^{44, 45} It is said to be adopted in July 2017 and implemented by January 2018 but is yet to happen. The Parliament of Armenia has approved a detailed tobacco control law on February 2020 which makes plain packaging compulsory.⁹⁸ In comparison, countries such as Lebanon, Azerbaijan, Syria and Palestine have not mandated pictorial warning and size of warning is less than 50% of the cigarette pack in Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, Azerbaijan, Syria and Palestine.^{82-94, 99-102}

Challenges for the Implementation of Plain Packaging: Experience from Other Countries

Australia was the first country worldwide to implement plain packaging. There were various legal challenges that the country faced by the tobacco industry to prevent and delay the implementation of plain packaging.^{103, 104} Legal challenges were also faced by other countries such as United Kingdom, France, Norway and Ireland.¹⁰⁴ Besides legal challenges, tobacco industry organize various campaigns in countries such as United Kingdom, Australia, Netherlands, and Canada to oppose plain packaging. The theme of these campaigns includes the negative effects of plain packaging which violation of intellectual property rights, induce illicit trade, lack of evidence on effectiveness on plain packaging, decreasing small business and limiting individual choice which creates “nanny state”.¹⁰⁵

The latest legal challenge made to World Trade Organization (WTO) was in favour of Australia.^{103, 104} WTO has decided that plain

packaging does not violate any intellectual property rights and international trade. In fact, plain pack is necessary to achieve public health goals. Hence this gives many countries confidence to implement plain packaging without fear of violating trade or intellectual property.

Similarly, the legislation of plain pack was delayed for about 7 years in Thailand due to similar litigation of infringement of trademark and intellectual property rights by tobacco industry.¹⁰⁴ After WTO favored plain pack, plain packing came into force quickly. Subsequently, this increased implementation of plain packaging in countries in Asia.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, only 5 countries have implemented plain cigarette pack in Asia which includes Thailand, Singapore, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Israel (Western and South-East Asia). Some countries in this region are yet to implement pictorial warning on cigarette pack and implement size of pictorial warning according to WHO requirement. Only region in Asia where all the countries have implemented pictorial warning on plain pack is South-East Asia. Timor Leste in South-East Asia region has the largest pictorial warning the world. Although some countries in Asia have not implemented plain pack, implementation of larger pictorial warning serve as a pathway for implementation of plain packaging.

All countries including countries in Asia should target to implement standardized pack, pictorial warning on cigarette pack and size of pictorial warning according to WHO requirements. Countries who have yet to implement plain pack and pictorial warning should collaborate with other countries to ensure that they produce wordings for legislation for these plain pack and pictorial warning with negligible loopholes. Other resources which can be used by these countries include the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids' Plain Packaging Toolkit, and WHO's report on the evidence, design and implementation of tobacco product plain packaging.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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