

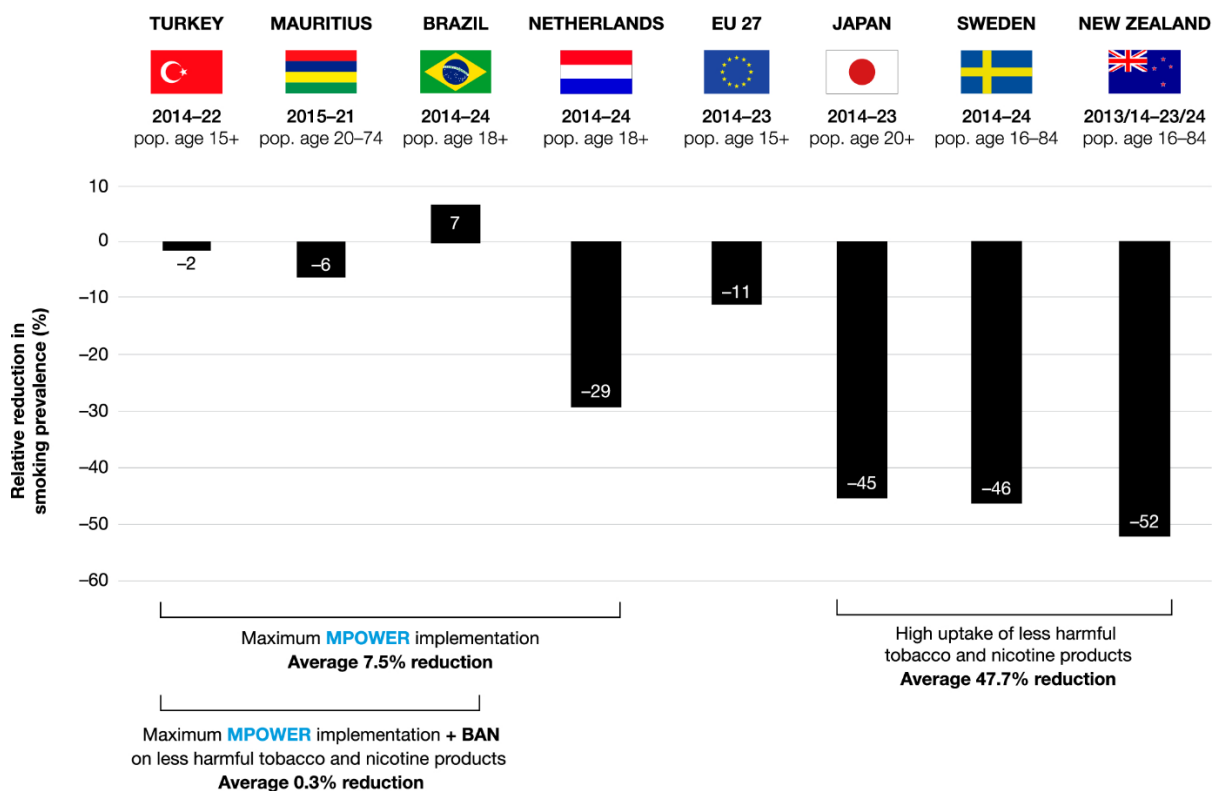
Innovation has allowed for the development of less harmful alternatives to smoking – Tobacco control policies need to catch up

Current tobacco control policies in many regions, originally designed decades ago to combat combusted tobacco use, are not fully addressing today's smoking issues.

Technological advancements have led to the creation of less harmful smoke-free products (SFPs), such as heated tobacco products (HTPs), e-cigarettes, and nicotine pouches, which can positively impact public health. However, several governments and public health organizations, including the WHO, are missing the opportunity by adopting a prohibitionist stance towards these products or treating them the same as cigarettes. In contrast, regions that allow access to and provide information about SFPs are experiencing unprecedented declines in smoking prevalence.

The effectiveness of tobacco control policies should ideally be measured by their impact on smoking prevalence.

A comparison of smoking prevalence data over a similar time frame across eight geographies shows that countries explicitly prohibiting SFPs and fully implementing all WHO MPOWER measures are struggling to significantly reduce smoking rates. Conversely, countries where smokers are switching in large numbers to SFPs have seen smoking rates drop by nearly 50% in just a few years.



Source: Fagerstrom, K., et al. (2025). [Two decades of global tobacco control: time for a rethink](#)

Currently, only four countries are recognized for fully implementing WHO MPOWER measures: Turkey, Mauritius, Brazil, and the Netherlands. Among these, Turkey, Mauritius, and Brazil explicitly prohibit SFPs, while the Netherlands does not. Notably, the Netherlands has seen the greatest reduction in smoking prevalence within a similar timeframe, achieving a 26% decrease.

In 2022, the smoking prevalence in Turkey, including both daily and occasional use, remained over 30%, unchanged since 2014. This stagnation persists despite the introduction of advertising bans, high excise taxes, plain packaging, a complete flavor ban on cigarettes, and a ban on SFPs. These measures suggest that smokers are unwilling to quit without access to less harmful alternatives. Additionally, Turkey faces significant challenges with illicit tobacco trade, which accounted for 27.9% of total tobacco consumption in 2022¹.

Mauritius (-6.2%), Brazil (-13.9%) and Thailand (-12.6%), which also ban SFPs and have significant tobacco control measures in place, have performed slightly better at curtailing smoking compared to Turkey, although largely in line with historic trends and nowhere near the success achieved by countries that allow access to and information about SFPs.

It is important to note that while the supply of SFPs has been curtailed in the aforementioned countries, the demand for less harmful alternatives persists. This has led to unintended consequences, such as the illicit trade in SFPs. This issue is particularly pronounced in Brazil, where, according to one survey, 7.3% of adults are currently using SFPs despite the ban. Due to the illicit nature of the market, there are practically no quality and safety controls, nor is there any government revenue generated from these products.

Japan has seen a significant reduction in cigarette smoking since the introduction of HTPs in 2014. From 2011 to 2015, cigarette sales declined annually by 1.8%, but this rate accelerated fivefold after HTPs roll-out ([source](#)). By 2022, smoking prevalence had reached a record low of 10.6% ([source](#)). This decline is attributed to the introduction of SFPs, stable quitting rates, and record-low initiation rates among non-smokers and youth.

New Zealand, which has integrated tobacco harm reduction in its tobacco control policy by differentiating regulations for combusted and non-combusted products, encouraging smokers who cannot quit to switch to less harmful alternatives (HTPs and e-cigarettes), has achieved a similar reduction in prevalence (52.8% reduction between 2013/14 and 2022/23).

In Sweden and Iceland, smokers have switched in large numbers to oral tobacco and nicotine products (snus and nicotine pouches) largely contributing to a massive reduction in smoking rates (49.5% and 50% respectively). Today, Sweden has the lowest smoking prevalence and lowest tobacco related mortality in males amongst all EU countries. It's likely not a coincidence that Sweden is the only EU country which has an exemption from a ban on snus.

To have a bold, positive impact on public health, we need innovative policies that encourage smokers to switch and companies to invest in less harmful alternatives. To accelerate smoking prevalence reduction, Governments should find the right balance between providing smokers with access to, and information about, less harmful alternatives, while minimizing their unintended use, continuing to restrict smoked tobacco products, the most harmful form of nicotine consumption.

¹ [Illicit-Tobacco-Consumption-in-Turkey.pdf](#)