



# FGD REPORT

FDG ON YOUTH TOBACCO USE, PERCEPTIONS, IMPACT AND  
POLICY SOLUTIONS CONSOLIDATED REPORT – SIERRA LEONE,  
SOUTH AFRICA AND ZAMBIA.

PRESENTED BY





## ABOUT Y-ACT

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Y-ACT is a youth-led initiative established in 2017 at Amref Health Africa, with a presence in over 21 African countries. The primary objective of Y-ACT is to mentor, support, and increase the capacity of youth advocates and youth-led organizations to influence health policy change in Africa. Since December 2022 Y-ACT is rolling out a project called Y-ACT Youth in Action initiative for youth-led Advocacy on Tobacco Control: This is a multi-country project in Africa set to roll out in Zambia, Sierra Leone, and South Africa. Y-ACT will work with 3 national youth-led organizations in the 3 countries and 2 regional youth-led organisations in Africa, to promote youth policy priorities in Tobacco control advocacy.

In this period Y-ACT sought to understand youth perceptions of tobacco use and the impact of the same. In collaboration with our national implementing partners, we conducted FDGs in all 3 countries to meet the following objectives:

- Determine tobacco use practices among youths in Zambia, South Africa, and Sierra Leone
- To draw upon youths' attitudes, feelings, beliefs, experiences, and perceptions of tobacco consumption.
- Analyze the Impacts of Tobacco use among youths.
- Assess the level of awareness and understanding of the existing tobacco control laws and policies in Zambia, South Africa, and Sierra Leone.

# INTRODUCTION

Y-ACT National Advocacy coordinators led Focused Group Discussions (FDGs) in Sierra Leone, South Africa, and Zambia facilitating discourse with 46 young people 30 male, 15 female, and 1 non-binary. The participants represented young people from diverse occupations including students, young parents, youth in entrepreneurship, artists, Tobacco farmers, traders, and users. In all the 3 countries Y-ACT mobilized participants from slums in urban areas, middle-class urban dwellers, and tobacco farming areas thus settlements characterized by poverty, drug abuse, crime, high illiteracy levels, and tobacco farming.

The FDGs focused on youth access, perception, and effects of tobacco use and also drew discussion on their understanding of tobacco control policies. Y-ACT developed and deployed an FDG questionnaire on the four stated areas. With this questionnaire, we intentionally lead discussions on not only tobacco use and harms but also understanding how young people can be engaged in policy change for tobacco control in their countries.

This FDG report highlights deliberations on tobacco use, perception, and impact on young people and their environs. Moreover, provides elaboration on policy solutions recommendations by young people for Tobacco control. Some interventions for tobacco control policy change recommended by participants include:

- Meaningful youth engagement in tobacco control policies design process for youth realities inclusion while developing regulation measures.
- Government investment in tobacco control education among the general public to promote awareness of the adverse effects of tobacco use and burst myths associated with tobacco use.

This report narration provides a discussion description from the FDG participants in four categories namely; tobacco use practices, perception of tobacco use/users, the impact of tobacco uses, and tobacco control policy understanding among young people.







# TOBACCO USE PRACTICES

In this section we looked at types of different tobacco products, tobacco products access, experience with tobacco users and factors influencing tobacco use among youth. In Zambia which is a leading tobacco growing country in Africa diverse tobacco product are available for consumption from its most raw to processed form like Balani (Raw dried tobacco leaves) and Fwaka (Cigarettes e.g. peter and downhill). Sierra Leone and South Africa participants also shared existence of raw tobacco products consumption among young people for example tobacco leaves and snuff (in powder form) locally referred to as Tobacca in Sierra Leone.

*“Older people like to use Balani because it is raw and they believe it is healthier because no chemicals are added to it.”- Zambian participant.*

Other types of tobacco products identified among the 3 countries include:

- Electronic cigarettes are like cigarette pens.
- Tobacco Pipes: They are usually made from wood, metal, or glass tobacco placed in the pipes and lit, the smoke from the burning tobacco is drawn and inhaled by the smoker.
- Cigarettes including local cigarettes like Bidi in South Africa which is a thin cigarette filled with tobacco flakes, it is stronger than cigarette as it contains unfiltered tobacco wrapped in a leaf. There’s also Fwaka (Cigarettes e.g. peter and downhill) in Zambia.
- Vape products including shisha, hookah, and hubby are bubbly common among high-class people and trendy amongst youth more so in entertainment joints.

Participants further shared how tobacco is at times mixed with other hard drugs for example in Zambia marijuana is mixed with tobacco leaves known as Chamba and further mixed with bicarbonate to make it stronger. These FDGs exhibited that tobacco products are easily accessible and affordable to people including school going children, for instance in South Africa savanna cigarettes local cigarette brand cost between \$0.05 -\$0.16 sold in local immigrant owned spaza shops in the township; similar retail prices in were noted in Zambia. In Sierra Leone, products like vapes and shisha are sold in supermarkets and can be rented at clubs and bars for a low price of \$5-\$10. Discussions from all countries highlighted that children are often sent to buy tobacco products by care givers often cigarettes. In Sierra Leone, it is observed that some kids a pick-up old cigarettes or use paper to imitate smoking.

A participant that sells tobacco products admitted that she has involved her children in her business, exposing them to tobacco products. Three participants said they started smoking in junior school buying cigarettes from nearby shops ,they were curious about smoking because of what they saw in movies and social media. Children in the African setting are exposed to tobacco products including child labour in tobacco farms, purchasing tobacco products and lighting cigarettes for their parents. Tobacco uses is normalized as a part of socialization in African homesteads therefore children grow up overlooking harms of tobacco consumption.

*“Products like marijuana cannot be sold in a shop but for cigarettes, one can buy them anywhere in the community,” - Zambian participant.*



Majority of participants elaborated their experiences with tobacco use or/and users who include uncles, brother, friends, classmates, colleague, neighbours and their parents.

A South African participant disclosed that she and her friend were high consumers of hubbly/hookah pipe smoking cannabis and tobacco flavour until her friend at 23years had a heart attack which was caused by the excessive flavoured tobacco and weed use more so, her two-year-old child has respiratory complications because of the effects of cigarettes as she was smoking when pregnant. The same participant shared her weed selling experience and stated that most of her customers were children of 14-17 years old and that they would mix cigarettes with weed.

Another participants shared that he has smoked cigar, cigarette, weed and bidi but overall, he said cigar is too strong and expensive hence he could not keep up with the habit, currently he is only smoking weed and had managed to stop all other products.

This FDG clearly brought out that gender norms on tobacco use are changing girls and women consume tobacco too compared to the past where boys and men were the majority consumers. This is mainly because tobacco use is influenced by lifestyle trends and misinformation among peers; for example, in Zambia participants mentioned Nsunko (powdered tobacco) women put under their tongue for body warmth and to attract men. Additionally, in Zambia tobacco is used to make hair products to promote hair growth used by women locally known as hair fertilizer. South African participants mentioned that women smoke to lose weight.

*“Vaping is becoming prominent amongst women as it is considered “safer” due to its appeal, the size and how it slips easy in your bag and the overall convenience of it,” - South African participant.*





## FURTHER FACTORS INFLUENCING YOUTH TO CONSUME TOBACCO DISCUSSED IN THE FDGS INCLUDE;

- Age-set initiation - In South Africa most young boys are introduced to smoking through the initiation process of going to the bush to become a man which is practiced by almost all South African native cultures, There is a notion that smoking is somehow associated with manhood hence first exposure to smoking is usually through the passage of manhood. In Sierra Leone youth in provinces believe that smoking is a sign of maturity.
- Tobacco use improves concentration while studying This came out from all countries' discussions however this notion was challenged by some participants as they gave illustrations of lazy tobacco users whose tobacco consumption has hindered their productivity and in Zambia long-term tobacco users experience shaky hands thus unable to partake handy tasks.
- Entertainment scene- music videos, movies/show actors, DJs in Clubs, and social media influencers showcase tobacco use in glam and style thus portraying it as trendy thus encouraging tobacco consumption amongst young people; for example, DJ Kabza a well-known and loved DJ plays his set in clubs and is often smoking a hubby.
- Closely related to home, a south African participant shared: *“tobacco exposure starts at home with our family members, parents, elders, the people we admire and respect use these tobacco products therefore we grow up with the misconception that its acceptable to use these products. Our parents would send us to the shops to buy these products for them, When there would be a cigarette bud left most children take that bud and smoke it because they want to experiment.”*
- Friends Factor - influence from friends who use tobacco thus joining the habit to feel included.
- Stress relief: Some participants indicated that people smoke to cope with stress and relaxation; for example bullying whether at home, school, or unfavorable conditions at work because some believe that tobacco calms down the nerves therefore a lot of young people use tobacco products with the idea that it will calm them down.
- Curiosity - One of the participants who sells cigarettes in Sierra Leone said that she began smoking out of curiosity, as she was constantly exposed to the smell of cigarettes and decided to try it one day.
- Unemployment – with the high rates of unemployment among youth in all three 3 countries many young people lean on drugs including tobacco for stress relief, as a result of negative peer influence and other tobacco-selling businesses.

*“Most people who consume tobacco products are unemployed and lack access to financial resources, he stated that it’s ironic that unemployed people would adopt a habit that requires a lot of finances and as a result would resort to crime to support their habit, it robs them of their social life, economic inclusion, and creativeness,” - South African participant.*



## PERCEPTION'S ON TOBACCO USE

In this section, we delve into understanding youth attitudes, information, interaction with tobacco use, users, and tobacco control Programmes. The majority of the correspondents expressed disappointment in tobacco use while a considerable amount did not mind tobacco use and users. Discussions questioned tobacco control not being a priority for young people at the moment for example a South African participant shared that she saw a YouTube video where the tobacco bill was being discussed and a lot of people in the comments section wondered why the focus was on tobacco when there are other critical issues and this confirmed that most young people don't regard tobacco as a top priority.

A Zambian participant expressed: *"if the user feels good and smoking makes them focus when they study, then it's ok."* South African participant said that he does not see anything wrong with using tobacco products as he uses tobacco products (cigarettes) and he has been using for over a decade now. One Sierra Leone participant expressed that he does not mind if other people smoke tobacco. A South African participant mentioned that he does not see the use of tobacco as a problem but only when children use it, as their brains and body organs have not fully developed.

*"I am neutral to it because I live with adults who are smoking, and they do it around kids. My grandmother, my aunt, my uncle, and my mom smoke, they are all adults and they have been doing it all along. They are old enough to know that it is wrong, but they do it in front of kids. I am fine though"- South African participant.*

Another South African participant stated she understands that tobacco use has bad health implications however she feels adults can make their decisions and should be given freedom to live and do what they want including smoking.

Many participants in Sierra Leone have accepted smoking as a normal part of life and they don't care about the opinions of others when they light up a cigarette in their homes.

*"Some people choose to overlook their friends' smoking habits because they think it's none of their business and they don't want to interfere," Sierra Leone Participant.*

*South African participant said, "if it works for you its fine you can do it but it should not affect others around you as second-hand smoke is dangerous and you are endangering people without their consent."*



On the other hand, participants shared reasons for displeasure about tobacco use including:

- Youths have dropped out of school because of tobacco use and further addiction.
- Tobacco use contributes to adverse health consequences like Heart complications including stroke, cardiac arrest, heart failure; dental problems like tooth decay, gum disease, and oral cancer and respiratory problems like lung cancers.
- A South African participant was aware of the financial implications of that tobacco related diseases burden that the national health care system and gave an example of Baragwanath Hospital in Soweto there is ward assigned to Hubbly-bubbly and vapes patients where patients are suffering from respiratory complications.
- Some participants de-associate with tobacco use because they have witnessed loss of lives due to tobacco related complications amongst family and friends.
- Tobacco use among youth is saddening because they are not fully informed about the dangers of tobacco use and tobacco effects are often if not always seen in the long run.
- Interrupts creativity among young people because once a person becomes addicted to nicotine they become fixated about getting money for another cigarette neglecting things they used to enjoy like playing sports.

*“The usage of tobacco steals away social constructiveness. We end up living with people whom we clearly do not know because they wake up to go sit in corners the whole day hustling money to support their habit and it steals our creativity to a point where some would say that in order to ignite creativity, some need to consume tobacco products first which really should not be the case,” South African participant.*

*“Young people have become less productive and have become slaves to tobacco,” Zambian Participant.*


Another Zambian Participant noted that tobacco use among friends promotes negative attitudes explaining that the chemicals disturb the user’s view of judgment and conflicts arise. The tobacco industry has been exploiting the vulnerability of young people through aggressive advertising strategies; examples elaborated in Sierra Leone include using social media platforms to promote tobacco products and brands like having online communities and influencers posting attractive images or videos of smoking, sponsoring sports events or teams that associate tobacco with excitement, success and prestige. Tobacco companies may pay for the naming rights for stadiums, arenas, and races or display their logos on uniforms, equipment, and banners. Participants in Zambia expressed not witnessing tobacco product advertisements on TV or radio however, advertising posters and billboards exist tobacco companies make products appear attractive to youth.

*A Zambian participant said that “shisha pens look nicer than the actual pen used in schools.”*





*“Shisha pens look nicer  
than the actual pen used  
in schools.”- Zambian  
Participant*



A South African Participant shared that said the cigarette package is too appealing and attractive therefore when you buy a pack of cigarettes you don't feel like you buying something that is detriment to your health, he further stated the side effects are written "smoking kills" but it's a known fact that young people are not interested in reading. In South Africa and Zambia vapes stalls in shopping malls advertising electronic tobacco products in a luxurious and enticing manner public colourful displays of tobacco products and hookah pipes on store windows. Looking into how tobacco use impact social well-being of young people some participants in Sierra Leone said that tobacco use helps them form social bonds with other users and create a sense of belonging. However, not everyone is happy with this trend. One participant reported that a group of young men in his community call themselves "Shisha boys" and smoke shisha together every evening. He said he does not want to associate with them because he thinks they are troublemakers. Another participant said he has distanced himself from some of his friends who smoke cigarettes because he cannot stand the smell thus feels lonely and isolated because of this.

*"Adolescent boys will utilize tobacco to build stronger bonds," South African Participant.*

South African participant expressed that tobacco use steals quality time in relationships and has an effect on interactions with your romantic partner who might not like the smell of cigarettes also steals financial stability because tobacco products becomes part of grocery to others and even comes before grocery to some. Zambian participants discussed that people who smoke don't do it in public they know that it is embarrassing to smoke. Have low self-esteem as tobacco addicts stop taking care of their personal hygiene and because of that, they isolate themselves. The FDG participants shared about Tobacco Control interventions they are aware of in their countries stated below. A large huge number of participants did not know of any interventions targeting tobacco control exclusively as tobacco prevention interventions are usually included in alcohol and drugs programs; A Zambian participant mentioned that youth friendly spaces mentors in clinics talk about drug abuse and emphasis is on marijuana or cocaine but not tobacco. All participants in Zambia did not know of any tobacco control program in the Country and that their interaction with this FDG is the first time they are interacting with the topic.

Focus 1000, a non-governmental organization that works to improve health and social outcomes in Sierra Leone, organized a workshop on tobacco use and its adverse effects in February this year. Sierra Leone coalition members shared their experiences and learnings since joining the project and how they have been involved in various activities such as media campaigns, policy dialogues, community outreach and research. A participant from Advocacy for Women and Youth Empowerment (AWYE) organized an internal workshop on Tobacco for his organization, where he educated his colleagues on tobacco use's health social and economic impacts.

In South Africa, The National Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) learning syllabus which was in school 12-13 years ago did attempt to address substance abuse but did not focus on tobacco since tobacco is not classified as a high-risk drug. Similarly, in Zambia tobacco is never discussed in school because it is not illegal. South African National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence (SANCA) tries to create awareness on drug abuse but unfortunately focus is not on tobacco rather illicit drugs such as crystal meth, mandrax, heroin and alcohol. Additionally, patients admitted for substance dependency at SANCA are often allowed to smoke cigarettes as means to cope with withdrawals therefore there are inadequate tobacco control programs targeting the youth.



Majority of South African participants did not know of any tobacco control measure ; one participant highlighted that she only knows the sign “no smoking “ in malls and some restaurants. Another one explained that he knew about The Tobacco Products and Electronic Delivery Systems Bill through a popular podcast channel on YouTube (Podcast and Chill) where the host was vehemently advocating for the bill to not be adopted since he was an avid tobacco user and that is pretty much all he knows about any tobacco policies.

10 out of the 16 Sierra Leone participants knew about the National Tobacco and Nicotine Act but had little or no idea about the provisions of the Act. According to some participants, Tobacco control measures have not been effective in Sierra Leone because of inadequate enforcement, corruption and low awareness of the existing laws. They mentioned that the Tobacco and Nicotine Act of 2022 banned public smoking and the sale of cigarettes to minors has had some positive effects but more needs to be done to ensure comprehensive implementation.

In South Africa all participants were unwilling to access information on tobacco control a close case to Zambia where they stated they had no interest in looking for information on the issue. Low literacy rate among young people in Sierra Leone presents as a challenge in accessing information on tobacco control as many young people cannot read the information available on Tobacco and Nicotine Act or may have difficulty understanding it.

**Participants shared about the following interventions to reduce tobacco use among young people;**

- Public education on Tobacco and its adverse health effects.
- Popularization, implementation, and enforcement of the Tobacco and Nicotine Act of 2022 in Sierra Leone.
- Setting up the Tobacco Regulatory Council in Sierra Leone.
- Establish anti-tobacco school clubs/universities and communities to promote active involvement of schools, community forums, and school governing bodies in awareness creation on tobacco.
- Door-to-door campaigns because behavioral change takes time hence the more one talks about an issue the more the target becomes responsive.
- Having friendly dialogues with the users as opposed to shaming them.
- Enforcing age restrictions for tobacco products and packaging them in a way that is strict, uninviting, and emphasizes the dangers of tobacco.
- Involvement of police to ensure adequate implementation of age restrictions and illicit tobacco trade.
- Reduce exposure to tobacco through media outlets' content regulation and hold them accountable for the type of content they put out.
- Awareness creation on long-term effects of tobacco on youth-friendly media outlets for example Tik Tok, YouTube, Instagram
- Local township spaza shops must be regulated as they sell illicit cheap tobacco products even to minors



# IMPACT OF TOBACCO USE

In this section, we look at the health, social, and financial implications of tobacco use.

- Participants shared the following health concerns associated with tobacco use:
- Respiratory issues like breathing difficulties, lung cancer, Tuberculosis (TB), prolonged coughing, and asthma; for example, during Covid 19 pandemic a Zambian was diagnosed with Tuberculosis but since the person was a heavy smoker he still continued smoking in the hospital.
- Dental problems like oral cancer, tooth decay, and gum disease.
- Mental illnesses like depression, low self-esteem, and laziness.
- Cardio-vascular diseases like heart attack, and stroke.
- Blindness.
- Pregnancy complications and childbirth disaffect for example low childbirth weight.

Looking at the social and economic impact of tobacco use participants from all countries elaborated on its contribution to Gender Based Violence at the household level. For example, in Zambia, if a household's primary provider is a tobacco user they divert a lot of resources including money and time to tobacco products and use therefore absconding some domestic duties like parenting time, grocery purchases, etc. Similarly, in South Africa, a participant shared a family that had to rely on government assistance for basic needs like food because the primary household provider is addicted to smoking.

*“Tobacco products form part of people’s budget and limit their broader thinking in terms of funds allocation in the household,” South African Participant*

Nexus between tobacco use and crime came out clearly during the discussions as Tobacco uses at times result o criminal activities like pickpocketing in order to fund their addiction. In Sierra Leone a participant shared about his addiction story that began from tobacco use then progressed to Kush addiction that he had to sell most of his property to finance his addiction and eventually resulted to crime for survival ad he could not get a descent job.

*South African participant, “tobacco use amongst youth is usually followed up with initiation to petty crimes which ultimately leads to more serious crimes because money is needed to support the habit.”*

Tobacco use implications in academic and career performance are evident in school-going children who mostly smoke as a result of peer influence, for concentration while studying, or mirroring behaviors from home and teachers. Nicotine Addiction has led to school dropouts as a result of consistent disciplinary action from the school i.e. suspension due to tobacco use, poor performance, and school absenteeism.

*‘Employees who smoke during office hours misuse company time with their smoke breaks which affects productivity,’ South African participant.*

In Zambia it was recorded that long-term tobacco users experience shaky hands thus cannot properly perform handy jobs thus poor performance at the work place.



# POLICY LANDSCAPE AND SOLUTIONS ON TOBACCO CONTROL

Y-ACT sought to understand the level of awareness of tobacco control policies among young people and capture their recommendations for policy change on the same. Across board, participants were not well aware of tobacco control let alone tobacco policies existing in their countries. In **Sierra Leone**, few participants stated to have heard about the Tobacco and Nicotine Act which is a new law enacted in February 2023 however, they lacked information on the provisions of the policy. In **Zambia**, a participant shared that they know of warnings on “no smoking in public” but are not sure if the word ‘public’ is defined because he has observed that in buses people do not smoke but while walking alone in the streets of town they are free to smoke.

A considerable number of participants have interacted with the enforcement of tobacco control policies For example in **South Africa** a participant witnessed someone being kicked out of a mall because of smoking and another saw on a TikTok video of someone lighting a cigarette in a plane and was reprimanded. In South Africa, smoking was banned during Covid-19 however everything reverted when Covid-19 stopped being a public health priority. A **Zambian** participant shared that he is only aware of how the government tells the farmers what price to sell tobacco products at the end of the farming season.

Furthermore, despite government efforts to provide some tobacco control provision measures young people easily assess tobacco products for instance even during the smoking ban in South Africa during Covid-19 illicit consumption of tobacco products mushroomed.

*“The fact that there is no information among the youth about tobacco control and tobacco control policies is a contributing factor to the increased accessibility,”South Africa participant.*

In **Sierra Leone** tobacco products are available in shops, kiosks, supermarkets, bars, clubs and every corner in the Central business districts.

*“Even a child can be sent to buy cigarettes,”Zambian participant.*

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**FDG participants provided the following recommendations on how organizations like Y-ACT can contribute to shaping tobacco control policies:**

- Raise awareness to increase sensitization on tobacco use and its adverse effects in order to establish tobacco control as a priority in communities.
- Y-ACT to upscale similar discourse on tobacco control in communities to build public awareness of tobacco control policies.
- Meaningful engagement of youth in tobacco control policies design process so that youth realities are considered while developing regulation measures
- Engage the proper government bodies to influence the implementation of the Tobacco and Nicotine Act in Sierra Leone
- Utilize digital platforms and social media to increase public education on Tobacco.
- Mobilize other young people to amplify their voices and increase advocacy efforts against Tobacco.

In conclusion, discussions from the three countries have revealed shared themes concerning the normalization of tobacco consumption at various levels, including within households, among peers, and in the broader community. Additionally, there is a concerning trend of children being exposed to pro-tobacco environments, leading to their use of tobacco products at a young age and the glamorization of tobacco among youth and young adults, often through trendy devices like shisha and e-cigarettes. Furthermore, contemporary gender norms related to tobacco use are evolving, with an increasing number of women participating in tobacco consumption.

This marks a shift from the past, when tobacco use was predominantly a male behaviour. Girls and women are now involved in various aspects of the tobacco trade and are using tobacco for purposes such as enhancing physical appearance, including promoting hair growth, weight loss, and generating body warmth to attract men. Despite the well-documented adverse effects of tobacco use, encompassing both physical and mental health consequences, as well as significant social and economic implications, it is apparent that African governments have not placed a strong emphasis on prioritizing tobacco control measures. Consequently, there is a notable lack of awareness among the general public regarding tobacco control policies.



# COUNTRY ACTIVITIES PICTORIAL



*Focus group discussion in Chipata, Zambia*



*Focus group participants in Livingstone, Zambia pose for a photo after the discussion .*



*Participants listening to a brief presentation on "Why tobacco control"- Freetown Sierra Leone*



*Group photo of participants after the focus group discussion activity.- Freetown Sierra Leone*



*Group photo of participants after the focus group discussion activity.- South Africa*



*South African youth dismantling perceptions on tobacco*





To partner with Y-ACT on our journey raising youth voices across the globe for change, contact us at: [youthadvocacy@amref.org](mailto:youthadvocacy@amref.org) and let us explore the opportunities that lie ahead!

[www.yactmovement.org](http://www.yactmovement.org)

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**Y-ACT YOUTH IN ACTION 2017-2023**