

Pascal Diethelm, President, OxyRomandie, Geneva:

Campaigning for tobacco control in Switzerland: grassroots advocacy in action

The author first described the situation in Switzerland with respect to tobacco control. Switzerland could be considered as a haven for tobacco companies, for several reasons. First, Switzerland is not bound by the international legal instruments on which tobacco control policy can be based in the other European countries: it is the only country of Europe, with the Czech Republic, not to have ratified the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control and has therefore no obligation to align its legislation with the WHO treaty. It is not a member of the EU, and feels therefore free to ignore EU directives, notably those dealing with tobacco advertising and sponsorship. In the Swiss federal system, public health is mostly a local (i.e. cantonal) competency, which makes it easier for tobacco lobbyists to use the financial power of their companies to influence local politicians, who become themselves lobbyists for tobacco interests at the federal level. Together with these reasons, favorable taxation, a culture of secrecy and a context of lax laws - when they are not simply absent - as it almost impossible to sue the tobacco industry over health and liability issues - make Switzerland a haven for the big tobacco multinationals. Several of them have important facilities in the country. PMI has its operational global headquarters in Lausanne and its worldwide R&D centre in Neuchâtel. JTI has its worldwide headquarters in Geneva, while PMI, BAT and JTI all have large factories in the country. Switzerland can indeed be considered as the ashtray of Europe.

Pascal Diethelm also showed how the tobacco industry is interfering with tobacco control policy in Switzerland, using previously secret internal industry documents now available on the Internet. The industry uses strong lobbying at all levels of the Swiss political hierarchy, creates coalitions with organizations which have a vested interest in tobacco (hospitality industry, advertising agencies, employers trade unions, alcohol industry, etc.), and takes advantage of the difficult economic context, resorting to threats of delocalizing its factories and business. In such an unfavorable environment, is it still possible to have an effective tobacco control policy? The speaker showed, using national statistics, that the prevalence of smoking has significantly decreased in Switzerland since 2000, and that exposure to passive smoking has decreased even more during the same period. While the federal law to protect people against passive smoking is weak - it is based on the now defunct "Spanish model" - several cantons enjoy much stricter smoking bans, and notably the five western French speaking cantons.

Pascal Diethelm's association, OxyRomandie, was closely involved in coordinating actions in those five cantons that have stricter smoking bans. He explained how such an achievement was possible in a tobacco-friendly context. The association used a stepwise approach. The *first step* was for OxyRomandie to get together with other NGOs with which it shared a common goal, and initiate partnerships, in view of creating a core group for coordinating activities.

The *second step* was to prepare public opinion. With its allies, OxyRomandie organized communication campaigns aimed at:

- Improving the public's awareness about the issue
- Exposing and correcting the disinformation spread by the tobacco industry

- Helping people articulate what they knew already, but could'nt express clearly
- Denormalizing smoking and normalizing the « smokefree » concept

The *third step* was to create a very large coalition of supporters. Smoking ban was framed as a public health issue, not just a tobacco control issue. The coalition was further extended beyond public health, to include, for example, a labor union of the hospitality industry and associations of consumers.

The *fourth step* was to take the initiative politically. This was achieved by taking advantage of the cantonal direct democracy system, which allows citizen to launch "constitutional initiatives" aimed at amending the local constitution. Initiatives were launched in four cantons with the purpose of establishing smoking bans in public places; in the fifth canton, the legislative route was found preferable.

The *fifth step* was to organize a campaign aimed at convincing citizens to vote for the smoking ban. OxyRomandie learnt how to deal with journalists to obtain the most effective media coverage of its position. OxyRomandie also realized that it was important to frame its message in a way that would convince the widest number of people and would, at the same time, undermine the arguments of the other side. It used the notion of "freedom" in its communication, with slogans such as "For an air of freedom!" - putting the notion of freedom on its side, while this was the main (and often only) argument of its opponents.

These five steps were overall very successful, since the five western French speaking cantons of Switzerland now represent a solid block on the Swiss map where the strictest smoking bans are in place. In Geneva, as voters adopted the smoking ban by a majority of 80%!

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