

TobaccoUnmasked at Sri Lanka observatory

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CCT Director Mahesh Rajasuriya

The information portal for the newest tobacco control observatory, designed to inquire into and document tobacco industry interference in public health policy-making, opened in July in Sri Lanka.

TobaccoUnmasked (tobaccounmasked.lk) is part of the Centre for Combating Tobacco (CCT), which opened in 2016 at the University of Colombo, in Sri Lanka. We spoke to the CCT's Director, Dr Mahesh Rajasuriya.



FCA: Is the ultimate goal of the CCT to turn public opinion against the tobacco industry?

Dr Mahesh Rajasuriya: Our public is well aware of the unethical tactics of the tobacco industry. In fact, this was a main topic of the political discourse prior to the last presidential election. The current President has indicated that his anti-tobacco industry stance helped him to win the mandate of the people.

The idea of the CCT is to organise public opinion more strongly by giving relevant actors what they always needed and lacked: accurate up-to date-information on the nature of the interference of the tobacco industry in public health matters.

'Relevant actors' means activists in the tobacco prevention field, researchers studying the tobacco industry ... as well as trainees who are involved with tobacco control and public health, policy makers who are involved with decision-making that significantly affects the health of the people, politicians who might potentially support—as well as block—anti-tobacco industry measures, and above all, the public who would be able to put pressure on decision makers in the end.

"We expect that the industry and industry-friendly big shots will be terrified to even hear the word TobaccoUnmasked!"

FCA: We saw [one of your recent entries](#), about the appointment of a tobacco industry director to the board of a semi-government hospital. Is this an example of how you plan to operate, by highlighting activities and exposing them to the public?

MR: Exactly! The public IS aware, and the 'relevant actors' do know, that there are behind-the-curtain deals between the industry and the country's decision-makers, but they may not know the exact details. We expose them. Well, the information, most of the time, is already in the public domain. However, it has been presented in a way that does not catch the attention of the 'relevant actors'. We make sure that it does.

That irritates, shames and stigmatises anti-public health decision makers. And it portrays the image of the industry (as well as individual tobacco officials) in a more realistic light. Soon, we expect that the industry and industry-friendly big shots will be terrified to even hear the word TobaccoUnmasked!

We expect also that the mainstream media would always want to check with TobaccoUnmasked before they publish any news related to tobacco and public health.

FCA: Why was it decided to establish the CCT in the Faculty of Medicine? And why now? Does it have anything

to do with recent difficulties changing tobacco policy, such as the legal fight over the size of graphic health warnings?

MR: You are much closer to the truth than you think. Certain concerned parties, several years ago, tried to publish a document on tobacco industry interference in Sri Lanka but failed. Everybody seemed to be too scared to do that. And that hit us very hard. All the painstaking research was stacked on a shelf.

Truth no longer shelved

We knew that objective, academic-style, peer-reviewed mechanism, with no hidden agenda, openly representing and advocating public health interests, and with an official mandate to study tobacco industry interference, would be the way to overcome this challenge. Risky and important work done by dedicated activists, researchers and whistle-blowers no longer has to sit on shelves.

So we started the CCT as an academic centre of the Faculty of Medicine, University of Colombo, one of the oldest medical schools in Asia. The Centre and its work are subject to supervision, review and approval of the University, the faculty and a panel of distinguished scholars and activists in tobacco prevention who constitute our Technical Advisory Panel.

The CCT was established under the auspices of the WHO FCTC Secretariat with two generous grants, one from the Secretariat itself, the other from the International Union Against Tuberculosis and Lung Disease.

FCA: What kind of response has the CCT received? Has the industry commented?

MR: The industry has so far ignored CCT and its information portal, TobaccoUnmasked. However, we are certain that they are aware of our operation. Given that we have been online for only one month, there has been a significant response from the public.

FCA: You also have a regional mandate: have you already begun probing industry activities in other South Asian countries?

Separate portal for SEARO

MR: We intend to cover the whole South-East Asia region. For that we need a sound network of similar minds, which we plan to achieve through an upcoming regional meeting. We intend to create a separate information portal for SEARO.

While we go beyond the borders of Sri Lanka, we intend to go deeper into our own communities as well. Work is already underway to publish in Sinhala and Tamil, the two official local languages, in dedicated, language-specific versions of TobaccoUnmasked.

FCA: Other observatories have been established around the world. Are you collaborating with them?

MR: Our main inspiration came from [TobaccoTactics](#) at the University of Bath. We have close links with them, and our Editor, Dr. Manuja Perera, is currently placed with them as part of her overseas training in Community Medicine as a speciality... We are in contact with the Brazilian and South African observatories, although official links are yet to be formalised.

FCA: Any final words?

MR: Anybody who has information related to tobacco industry activities potentially affecting public health in SEARO, please do let us know. Your identity will be kept confidential. You can also contact us anonymously via our [cct.lk website](#).

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