Author’s response to reviews

Title: Who calls the shots in tobacco control policy? Policy monopolies of pro and anti-tobacco interest groups across six European countries.

Authors:

Thomas Kuijpers (t.kuijpers@maastrichtuniversity.nl)

Anton Kunst (a.kunst@amc.uva.nl)

Marc Willemsen (marc.willemsen@maastrichtuniversity.nl)

Version: 2 Date: 13 Mar 2019

Author’s response to reviews:

Reviewer reports:
Rachel Brown, PhD (Reviewer 1): There are two different titles on the draft - needs correcting.

Corrected.

I have significant concern over the publication of a paper containing quotes for a study that does not have ethical approval from an institutional ethics board and can't recommend it at this time without amendment to the ethics process. Given that ethical approval wasn't obtained it would have been beneficial to go back to participants with the final draft to confirm that use of quotes was acceptable and to state this in the draft. Furthermore, while participant identities are protected by reducing descriptions to generic terms like 'member of parliament' or 'civil servant' this is also actually problematic as it doesn't allow for assessment of the relative expertise or positioning of that participant to speak on this subject with authority because it's quite vague.

We have corresponded with the editor about this issue. We have now elaborated about this in the ‘ethics approval’ section (page 24, line 14 – page 26, line 16), with reference to relevant legislation in each country involved. We are convinced that we did not need to obtain ethical approval: this is a non-intrusive study and falls outside the scope of national regulations as such.

We conducted stakeholder interviews, gathering information about national level policymaking. More importantly, stakeholders signed an informed consent form and were able to withdraw from participation without any reason at any time during the interview. Furthermore, the informed consent form ensured that data in the final article would be anonymized.

This anonymization relates to the second point raised by the reviewer: we needed to provide some information regarding the stakeholders’ professions, yet could not be too specific. For example, we interviewed some individuals that have very distinct national profiles (e.g. previous health ministers). If we were to write down ‘previous minister of health’ combined with the
country, it can very easily lead to identification of this specific person because not all health ministers are equally committed to tobacco control.

Abstract
The phrase 'policy dominance' is unclear and would benefit from elaboration to set up the rest of the paper. Does it refer to being the dominant influence in the policy making process?

That is indeed the case, we have now explained how we understand this term in the background section (page 4, line 44-46).

Conclusion. Page 2, line 49 capital T needed on 'the'.
We have corrected this (page 2, line 51).

Main text:
Page 3, line 12 should be 700,000.
We have corrected this (page 3, line 12).

The section could be clearer in explaining that supranational and national policy actions are not necessarily either/or as it reads at the moment. The role of government is not just developing local policy but also implementing supranational measures, for example advertising restrictions which are now part of the EU Tobacco Products Directive rather than developed by individual member states. The interaction of governments with supranational bodies could be elaborated on here.

As we focus only on national level policymaking, we wanted to highlight the role of supranational institutions such as the EU to emphasize the fact that tobacco control policy is developed at multiple levels. We believe that a more elaborate discussion about the interaction of layers of governance would disrupt the flow of the background section. Therefore we decided not to further elaborate on this topic there.

The next section on the role of interest groups reads well however paragraph 2, page 4 is a little sparse on detail of why a cross-national approach may be preferred. More information is needed here on what this adds over the depth of data obtained in single case studies.

We now give another argument for choosing a cross-national approach: as the arrangement of (political) institutions differ between European countries, a comparison of multiple political system can highlight the role of such institutional arrangements in the policy process. In this case for example: how well the NGO community is developed, the degree in which the tobacco industry is economically represented, the centrality of the health ministry, the interpretation of 5.3 etc. Such variables are usually treated as constants in single-country studies. We included this argument now at page 4, line 36-42.

Methods
The description of participant responses is good however information on stakeholders is limited and doesn't provide enough detail on their involvement in tobacco policy. This makes it difficult to assess their level of expertise. I appreciate that this is to ensure anonymity but it is then hard for the reader to know why they were selected and how equipped they are to contribute.

Without entering in personal details, we can assure that respondents have been selected for the expected ability to contribute to this research with meaningful information.

Paragraph 1 states that the larger study was conducted in six countries but then states that the SILNE-R project covers seven countries. I would recommend that the sentence be clarified.

In the original SILNE-R project, Portugal is included as well. We unfortunately needed to drop Portugal from the study because of continued non-response of 3 out of 5 approached stakeholders. Although the 2 interviews we did conduct (by phone) were rich in information, we thought we could not make valid claims about a nation’s policy process on the basis of such limited data. We now discuss this issue in the revised manuscript (page 7, line 26-34).

Page 6, line 52 - states that quotes were anonymized as much as possible to ensure confidentiality. Does this refer to only using job titles or does it mean that quotes were edited? It'd be helpful to explain more about how the data was treated here, particularly in light of the absence of ethical approval for the study.

We indeed anonymize only the job titles/professions and did not edit the quotes themselves. However, we did not select quotes that could lead to identification of specific individuals. We now include a more detailed description on stakeholder confidentiality in a separate paragraph (page 7, line 39-49).

Analysis - The choice of framework methods is appropriate to the study aims and the analysis process is well-described.

Thank you.

Results

The identified themes are appropriate and well-chosen and provide clear illustrations of the different positions taken across the selected countries. The Background section suggests that the display ban is the main focal point of the comparative analysis but it actually reads as just one of many themes in Results. It should be less prominent in Background to manage expectations of the amount of discussion on it later.

The reviewer argues that there is an imbalance between background and results’ sections, regarding the prominence of the display ban as a case study for policymaking. We agree and have restored this imbalance by referring to tobacco display bans more prominently in the results’ section. This also relates to the point of the second reviewer who wishes to have a clearer narrative in the presentation of the results. We have re-written substantial parts of the results-section in order to meet the wishes of both reviewers (page 9, line 19-page 19, line 11). We start each issue with a narrative paragraph, and we refer to display bans more explicitly.
Furthermore, we now also discuss the specific policy processes regarding display bans in the six countries in a separate paragraph of the discussion (page 21, line 44 – page 22, line 25). And we now mention a tobacco display ban in the abstract as well (page 2, line 13-15).

Page 12, line 16 -should read 'a type of income'

Corrected.

Discussion

The discussion of the framing of tobacco within the countries is well-written and interesting and the framing of tobacco policy within the larger political processes of a country is very useful. It would be helpful to provide a little more detail on the legislative framework for tobacco in place in each country at the moment to provide context e.g. adoption or otherwise of the type of measures discussed in Background. It would also be helpful to outline tobacco use rates and costs in each country (probably within Background). This is important to consider why countries may have taken variable paths in terms of policy. There is a 'which came first?' element to the discussion, which isn't addressed here and probably needs to be considered through a timeline of tobacco control within each country. For example, how does a strong NGO community take hold in the first place? What is it about the policy context that allows that to happen? This would add significantly to understanding why the current picture looks as it does.

We acknowledge the reviewer’s concern, because policy processes in individual countries are indeed idiosyncratic and subject to many influences (e.g. historical, cultural etc). What we aimed to do in this paper is highlight the fact that, despite numerous differences between these countries, there are also considerable similarities, for example with regards to framing and institutional arrangements, which we claim is dependent on which interest group has a policy dominance. We think that a more elaborate discussion about how countries come to demonstrate such ‘variable paths’ (e.g., by use of timelines), although useful in nuancing the findings presented, would take too much space for an already lengthy manuscript. Although we did not include timelines of individual countries, we discuss this issue now as a limitation at page 22, line 44-56.

Furthermore, we have included smoking prevalence per country in our new table with a summary of findings per country (Table 3).

In line with the concern about the broader tobacco control context and the point raised by reviewer 2, we have given a more elaborate consideration of the legislative framework regarding display bans in all countries in the discussion (page 21, line 44 – page 22, line 25) highlighting the notion that some countries have included such a ban as a relatively minor issue in a large comprehensive tobacco law, and others have systematically avoided discussions on tobacco control.

Jennifer McKell (Reviewer 2): I liked the premise of this paper, examining the role of powerful interest groups in policy-making relating to tobacco control, and I found a lot of the data
presented fascinating. I also felt convinced by the arguments set out in the discussion and conclusions. However, I struggled with the way in which the findings were presented. As I was reading through this section, I felt I was reading a list of illustrative examples simply transposed from interview transcript to manuscript. This section lacked a narrative to guide the reader through the findings making it feel incoherent and difficult to follow. As I read on, I was pleased to find that some of the analysis and interpretation I had looked for in the results was in the discussion, but it was frustrating to have to wait until this point in the paper to find these. Additionally, the lack of a strong narrative in the findings, to my mind, meant that important and interesting data was buried in the detail. The quotes from the Italian civil servant and the German civil society advocate under the section on transparency and the FCTC were particularly powerful yet recognition of this important evidence was muted.

We have reread our results-section after 8 months of not reading the manuscript and we understand this point. It was indeed quite hard to read and seemed incoherent. We have therefore re-written substantial parts of the results’ section in order to add a narrative (including explanations how the discussed themes relate to tobacco control legislation generally and a display ban specifically) and to remove superfluous details: (page 9, line 19-page 19, line 11)

Moreover, we included a table with the main findings summarized per country, for the reader to hold on to while reading the results (Table 3). We also included smoking prevalence per country, which was suggested by reviewer 1.

Additionally, I am confused why there was so little reference to actual policy-making relating to display bans within the findings, considering it was selected as an example of tobacco control policy for comparison earlier in the paper. By the end of the paper, the reader is no wiser as to the outcome of policy-making in relation to display bans in individual countries. Instead, I think it would be helpful to anchor the findings in relation to actual events and if possible, to also include some reference to the wider context of tobacco control in each country.

We have included more references to tobacco display bans in the narratives in the findings.

We have also included a paragraph about the policymaking processes regarding display bans with reference to actual legislation in the six countries (page 21, line 44 – page 22, line 25). We have tried to relate it to our main results on the relative dominance of pro and anti-tobacco control interest groups: Finland and Ireland having adopted such bans as minor issues in large comprehensive policy packages many years ago, policy inertia for a decade in Germany and Italy, and attempts to pass display bans by individual parliamentarians in The Netherlands and Belgium, facing an unwillingness of liberal-conservative ruling parties to regulate such health behaviors.

I felt the methods could also benefit from some minor revisions in relation to the description of the interviews and the analysis. I think it would be clearer to say that the interviews were started with an open question about the current status of a display ban in individual countries rather than saying that interviews started with a narrative part, as there is no information about what this contained. I also think it would be helpful to provide an overview of the topic themes discussed rather than simply saying they were related to the theory on policy monopolies. In terms of the
analysis, it would be good to explain why the codebook was developed by looking at Finnish transcripts only - important as this was presented as a cross-country comparison. Also, I feel there needs to be clarity about the purpose of using the Framework method, as the priority it has currently suggests its use provides a theoretical approach.

We removed the word ‘narrative’ from the sentence, and now only mention the open question about the current status of a display ban in the country (Page 7, line 56-58).

Interview topics are now listed (page 7, line 53 – page 8, line 12).

We now give a more thorough discussion about the development of the codebook, which was developed by contrasting the Finnish interviews with the German ones, as they demonstrate a large contrast in terms of tobacco control policy making (page 8, line 22-32).

We now discuss the reason of selecting the Framework method, which is that it allows us to analyze the data in both in terms of (groups of) cases (i.e.: countries or groups of countries) and by themes (page 8, line 22-24).

Overall, I found this an insightful and important piece of work and I would very much like to see it published after some important re-working of the findings and methods sections.

Thank you!