

Balanga City



Intervention area: Tobacco control

City action: A city-wide approach to creating a smoke-free city and banning tobacco advertising

Balanga City, Philippines is a popular tourist destination – in part thanks to the city’s ban on public smoking, which has resulted in exceptionally clean air enjoyed by tourists and residents alike. A key element of Balanga City’s vision of being a recognized university town and an emerging hub for technology-related businesses by 2020 has been to provide a healthy environment for students, residents and visitors.

In 2008, Balanga City’s Mayor Jose Enrique S. Garcia III successfully pushed for a ban on tobacco products in all public places and public utility vehicles in the city’s 80-hectare University Town area. This prohibited the sale, use and marketing of tobacco products and e-cigarettes within the area. The city also launched a tobacco-free programme called YOYO City of Balanga (a shorthand for “No to cigarettes in Balanga”). Next, the City Health Office spearheaded the “Teaming Up for a Smoke-Free Balanga City” programme on 13 July 2009, in collaboration with stakeholders such as community officials, colleges and universities, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and Balanga City Hall employees to carry out information drives against smoking.

In 2010, the Balanga City Health Office conducted a study on tobacco prevalence using the WHO Global Adult Tobacco Survey (GATS) tools and found that while 23.8% of the city’s residents smoked – below the 28.3% national prevalence rate – there was still room for improvement in tobacco control. As a result, in 2010 the city council passed a Comprehensive No-Smoking Ordinance (CNSO) to classify existing anti-tobacco policies, and adopted WHO Resolution WHA 42.19 declaring 31 May as “The City of Balanga’s No Tobacco Day”. The city government also

initiated a “Tobacco-Free Generation” (TFG) campaign – a reform initiative to eliminate tobacco smoking among those born after the year 2000.

In 2013, Mayor Garcia wrote to chief executives in neighbouring municipalities to request a halt to “blitzkrieg promotional activities” conducted near city borders by the tobacco industry. In 2014, the city launched “Don’t Be S.A.D. (Smoker, Alcoholic, and Drug Addict) to Be Healthy and Happy”, a programme to promote healthy lifestyles during adolescence. And for the 2015 World No Smoking Month, the city launched “Pamilya Ko, Mahal Ko, Say No to Sigarilyo” (meaning “I love my family, Say no to Cigarettes”) to involve youth in promoting smoke-free homes by writing letters to relatives to encourage them to pledge to quit smoking.

In 2016, the city council expanded the coverage of the smoking ban in the University Town to cover a further 3 km radius. The ultimate goal was to prohibit all sales, distribution, use, and advertising or promotion of tobacco and tobacco products, including ENDS (such as e-cigarettes). To enforce these laws, the city created a Smoke-Free Task Force to prosecute violators. Regular Smoke-Free Task Force meetings are now conducted to review achievements and provide information about enforcement activities.

By 2020 the city aims to have achieved a 5% decrease in smoking prevalence rates annually, assessed through continuous programme evaluation. A survey conducted by the City Health Office showed a decline in adult smoking prevalence from 23.8% in 2010 to 14.78% in 2014, and a decline in the prevalence of youth smoking from 32% in 2014 to just 1.63% the following year. There was also a 74% growth in business and a 75.7% increase in tourist arrivals from 2010 to 2017. Since 2012, 22 local government units, the University of the Philippines, Far Eastern University, and Bataan Peninsula State University have learned from Balanga City’s example. The impact of this programme was rolled out to other municipalities where similar smoke-free ordinances have been adopted.

Unsurprisingly, the city’s actions have seen heavy opposition from the tobacco industry. In July 2017 the Philippine Tobacco Institute (PTI), a trade association of cigarette manufacturers in the Philippines, challenged Balanga’s 2010 ordinance prohibiting the use, sale, distribution and advertising of cigarettes and other tobacco products, and its 2016 amendment making the University Town and its 3 km radius a smoke-free space. Unfortunately, a decision from a Regional Trial Court was issued in July 2018 in favour of the industry. An appeal was filed by the City of Balanga but in August 2019 the Court of Appeals upheld the ruling of the Regional Trial Court and denied the petition for review.¹ A further legal challenge was filed by PTI in May 2018 against the city’s 2016 Tobacco Free Generation Ordinance banning the sale of tobacco products to all Balangueños born on or after 1 January 2000.

Despite significant pressures from the tobacco industry, Balanga City’s anti-tobacco efforts have been very popular with the public. Mayor Garcia won re-election twice, showing that a strong stance on tobacco control can be a positive asset in local politics.

The Smoke-free and TAPS Ban Case Study on Balanga City, Philippines, was developed for the Regional Office for the Western Pacific in Manila, Philippines with the help of the Southeast Asia Tobacco Control Alliance (SEATCA). SEATCA would like to thank Mr Oliver Reyes Enriquez, Mr Calvin Orgasan and Ms Joan Consus, the Smoke-free Task Force under the guidance of Councilor Jerni Jett Nisay and Dr Mariano Antonio Banzon, and the City Government of Balanga under the leadership of Mayor Francis Garcia for sharing their experiences and challenges in making Balanga smoke-free.

ⁱ Court of Appeal voids Balanga ordinance provision on tobacco ban expansion. In: Philippine News Agency [website]. Manila: Philippine News Agency; 5 August 2019. (<https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1076988>, accessed 19 September 2019).