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The economics of tobacco: the genealogy of a style of thought

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ABSTRACT

What is variously termed the economics of tobacco or tobacco economics is best understood as a style of thought: a particular way to conceptualise and govern the use of tobacco articulated around an assemblage of knowledges, expertise and techniques of governance (Hacking 2002; Lakoff and Collier 2008). A fundamental element of this thought style is the idea that tobacco is a commodity traded in conformity with the laws of the market. Another key element is the health economics expert whose role is to identify these laws and to determine the quantities of tobacco produced, exchanged and consumed. Similarly important are strategies and tools like taxation models which make it possible to intervene upon the market when it fails to function as it should.

Over the last ten years, this style of thinking has become highly influential within the field of global tobacco control. Partnerships like the Bloomberg Initiative for Tobacco Reduction, international organisations like the WHO, governments, civil society groups like the Framework Convention Alliance and transnational public health expert networks – all have adopted the knowledges, experts and techniques that make up the economics of tobacco.

This paper explores the genealogy of this thought style. It examines how the knowledges, expertise and techniques of knowledge that make up the economics of tobacco were developed and assembled over the last forty years. More specifically, it explores three key moments in the history of tobacco economics: the research done by Joy Townsend at the UK Medical Research Council during the 1970-80s; the work of Kenneth E. Warner at the University of Michigan in the 1980-90s; and the studies conducted by Frank Chaloupka and Prabhat Jha at the World Bank in the 1990s.

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