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REEP: Research Unit on the Economics of Excisable Products

with the WHO FCTC Knowledge Hub on Tobacco Taxation

Newsletter #43, May 2026

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Acting Director's Message

Dear friends,

On 31 May, REEP joins the global public health community in commemorating World No Tobacco Day 2026 under the theme, "Unmasking the appeal – countering nicotine and tobacco addiction". This year's campaign highlights how the tobacco and nicotine industry continues to target young people through flavoured products, appealing packaging, and misleading marketing strategies. The campaign also draws attention to the rapid rise in the use of emerging nicotine products, including e-cigarettes and nicotine pouches, particularly among adolescents. Last week, Sam Filby was [interviewed](#) by the SABC, raising awareness of these issues.

This newsletter highlights several of REEP's recent activities from the past two months. REEP attended the [8th Global Alcohol Policy Conference](#) held in Brazil from 8-10 April, 2026. We are pleased to share that [Vanessa Darsamo](#) received a Carnegie PhD fellowship. We also published two articles in *Econ3x3*: one on [gambling taxes](#) and another on [cigarette illicit trade](#). Encouragingly, Track & Trace systems to monitor illicit trade appear to be gaining traction in South Africa.

We also report on two capacity building activities. First, our five-week online course (Tobacco Taxation 101), which concluded in mid-April 2026, provided training on tobacco taxation to 38 participants from across the globe. The next course will be offered in 2027. Second, from 21-23 April 2026, REEP, through the WHO FCTC Knowledge Hub on Tobacco Taxation, hosted an in-person, three-day [Learning Exchange](#) in Cape Town. Fiscal and health officials from seven countries shared their experiences in advancing health taxes. This event was funded by Cancer Research UK.

Best regards,

Nicole

Acting Director: Research Unit on the Economics of Excisable Products

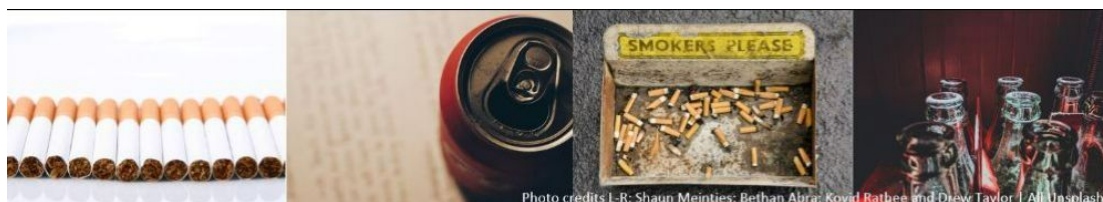


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NEWS: Research Unit on the Economics of Excisable Products

Vanessa awarded Carnegie DEAL PhD fellowship

REEP warmly congratulates Vanessa Darsamo on receiving a competitive Carnegie PhD Fellowship from the Carnegie Developing Emerging Academic Leaders (DEAL) initiative. Aligned with UCT's Vision 2030, the DEAL initiative aims to strengthen the career-paths of the next generation of researchers who are mentored and well-networked into a community of scholars, and to bolster the research capacity of UCT's departments and research hubs.

This fellowship is a major accomplishment for Vanessa as an individual scholar and for REEP as a research unit. The Carnegie Fellowship provides recognition and support to doctoral students with the potential to become future academic leaders in Africa. Selected from a highly competitive pool of applicants, Vanessa received the fellowship based on her excellent academic record and the strong mentorship provided by REEP.

The fellowship will support her to become a leader in health economics research in Africa. Her research on sugar-sweetened beverage taxation in Africa aligns with REEP's thematic interests and the fellowship's goal of supporting policy-relevant research that addresses development issues in Africa.

REEP staff attend 8th Global Alcohol Policy Conference (GAPC) in Brazil



Nicole Vellios and Mxolisi Zondi attended the **8th Global Alcohol Policy Conference** held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil from 8-10 April, 2026. GAPC was attended by alcohol policy makers, advocates, researchers, civil society activists and practitioners from 45 countries. The conference theme was: *Public Health and the commercial determinants of alcohol harm: responses by governments and civil Society*. The conference focused on governments' efforts in developing the most effective alcohol policies, advocacy efforts, overcoming vested interests, and the need for regional and global collaboration to reduce the harm caused by alcohol.

The SA delegation pictured below includes staff from REEP, UCT's School of Public Health, SA Medical Research Council, the Department of Social Development, Department of Trade, Industry and Competition, and the Southern African Alcohol Policy Alliance (SAAPA).



Alcohol policy work at REEP is funded by Vital Strategies. Nicole presented on beer excise tax pass-through (research by Estelle Dachy) and beer affordability (research by Mxolisi and Nicole). Mxolisi presented on [modelling the impact of tiered beer excise taxes on consumption and revenue in South Africa](#). The team engaged with key stakeholders, including National Treasury representatives, to discuss the upcoming 2026 alcohol excise tax framework.

Before the conference, on 7 April, Nicole and Mxolisi attended a workshop for organisations funded by Vital Strategies' [RESET Alcohol Program](#). Other countries funded by RESET and represented at the meeting included Brazil, Kenya, Mexico, the Philippines, and Colombia. The meeting brought together representatives from civil society organisations, government agencies, and academia (pictured below).



NEWS: WHO FCTC Knowledge Hub on Tobacco Taxation

WHO FCTC Knowledge Hub on Tobacco Taxation Learning Event (Cape Town)



The WHO FCTC Knowledge Hub on Tobacco Taxation celebrates ten years since joining the network of knowledge hubs providing technical assistance to Parties around the world on behalf of the WHO FCTC Convention Secretariat. This presented an opportunity to host a three-day learning event in Cape Town to reflect on lessons learned over the past decade of service provision as a knowledge hub. Government officials from Angola, Brazil, Cabo Verde, Hungary, Nepal, South Africa and Zambia attended the meeting alongside colleagues from [Cancer Research UK](#), [Resolve to Save Lives](#) and the WHO Health Tax Unit.

Over the three days, participants discussed the practicalities of moving reform from evidence to policy, addressing tax design questions on tobacco, alcohol, and sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs), confronting persistent political economy challenges, and sharing mitigation strategies against illicit trade.

Discussions highlighted the importance of simple and effective tax structures, coordinated cross-government engagement and evidence-based policymaking in strengthening health tax systems. Attention was given to the role of country-led data modelling in reducing information asymmetries during policy negotiations and supporting more credible reform proposals.

Country teams also had the opportunity to co-develop country action plans that helped prioritise and align national priorities and sequence technical support. These ranged from tobacco excise restructuring and alcohol tax reform to the taxation of novel nicotine products and SSBs. Participants emphasised the value of continued collaboration and peer exchange to navigate complex fiscal and political environments.

Building on the momentum generated during the workshop, the Knowledge Hub will initiate targeted country-specific technical support initiatives aligned with the action plans developed during the event. These follow-up engagements aim to support the implementation of evidence-based, context-responsive health tax reforms and strengthen long-term domestic capacity for health tax policy development.

In the Media

Op-Eds

- 31 March 2026: [Illicit cigarettes make up more than half the market](#), published by *Econ 3x3*, authored by Mxolisi Zondi, Kirsten van der Zee, Corné van Walbeek. (Reposted in [Polity](#))
- 14 May 2026: [A national tax on online betting in South Africa](#), published by *Econ 3x3*, authored by Nicole Vellios, Mxolisi Zondi and Corné van Walbeek. (Reposted in [Polity](#))

Media interviews



- 17 April 2026: Corné van Walbeek interviewed on SABC: "[Tobacco Survey | Illicit cigarettes trade constitute 50% of SA market](#)".
- 17 April 2026: Corné van Walbeek interviewed on CapeTalk / Radio 702, Early Breakfast show with Africa Melane: "[UCT study finds illicit cigarettes now dominate South Africa's tobacco market](#)".
- 19 May 2026: Corné van Walbeek interviewed on CapeTalk / Radio 702 by Stephen Grootes of *The Money Show*: "[Scan to spot fakes: SA's crackdown plan](#)". They discussed South Africa's plan to introduce track-and-trace technology that will allow consumers to scan alcohol, medicines, and cigarettes to verify their authenticity and crack down on counterfeit goods.
- 19 May 2026: Corné van Walbeek interviewed on RSG Geldsake with Moneyweb by Ryk van Niekerk: "[Verbruikers kan dalk eersdaag produkte \(veral sigarette\) skandeer om te sien waar dit vandaan kom](#)".
- 23 May 2026: Corné van Walbeek interviewed on Newzroom Afrika discussing [Government's plan to introduce digital products verification](#), via a consumer-facing track-and-trace system by 2026/2028.
- 24 May 2026: Sam Filby was interviewed by the SABC News on an 'It's Topical' segment, talking about youth vaping: "[Is there underage vaping crisis?](#)".



It's Topical | Is there underage vaping crisis?

News clippings

Cigarette illicit trade:

- 16 April 2026: [South Africa's illicit cigarette trade is booming](#), UCT News

16 April 2026: [UCT study reveals illicit cigarettes dominate SA's market](#), PoliticsWeb

17 April 2026: [More than half the cigarettes sold in South Africa are illegal, new research shows](#), Mail&Guardian

17 April 2026: Over half of South African cigarette market now comprised of illicit products,

- [Independent on Saturday](#) and [IOL](#).
- 17 April 2026: [Illicit cigarettes now make up more than 50% of SA market](#), EWN
- 17 April 2026: [Smoking kills ... illicit cigarettes kill more](#), ITOline
- 21 April 2026: [Illicit Cigarettes Dominate South Africa](#), Tobacco Asia
- 21 April 2026: [Illicit cigarettes make up 60% of South Africa's market, study finds](#), East Coast Radio News

Track & Trace:

- 19 April 2026: [UCT study finds illicit cigarettes now dominate South Africa's tobacco market](#), PrimeMedia Plus
- 7 May 2026: [Let's try this again: Govt has a new plan to track and trace illicit cigarettes](#), News24
- 19 May 2026: [Scan your booze, meds and cigs: SA's new plan against fakes](#), News24
- 19 May 2026: [Govt considers system enabling you as consumer to scan booze, cigarettes & meds to spot illicit products](#), EWN
- 20 May 2026: [South Africa Plans Smartphone Checks for Alcohol and Cigarettes](#), Vinetur

Gambling

- 19 May 2026: [UCT academics back national treasury's 20% online betting tax proposal](#), UCT News
- 20 May 2026: UCT academics support Treasury's proposed online betting tax as gambling concerns mount, [IOL](#), [Magzter](#) and [The Mercury](#).

Regards,
The REEP team

If you have any comments or feedback on this e-newsletter, or suggestions for possible story ideas for our next issue, please get in touch with the REEP team, by emailing us at:

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And contact the WHO FCTC Knowledge Hub on Tobacco Taxation team at:

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