

RACHEL KITONYO DEVOTSU WINS WORLD NO TOBACCO DAY AWARD

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The McCabe Centre's Regional Coordinator for Africa has been honoured by the World Health Organization for more than 15 years of leadership in tobacco control.

Rachel Kitonyo Devotsu still remembers the moment in 2007 when the Kenyan parliament passed the landmark *Tobacco Control Act* that she helped draft.

She remembers the high-fives among her small group of tobacco control advocates when the last vote was cast, and the look of defeat on the tobacco industry representatives in attendance.

Rachel was a young lawyer at the time, just a few years on from passing the Bar. She had recently made the difficult decision to give up her dream of a corner office in a high-powered law firm to pursue a full-time career advancing law to protect the health of her fellow Kenyans.

In 2004, she founded a grassroots lobby group called the Institute for Legislative Affairs (ILA) with some like-minded lawyers and set to work on reviving tobacco control legislation that had stalled in previous years.

The odds were stacked against them, with significant objections from the tobacco industry. But with Rachel and the ILA's legal expertise to help draft the bill, and Rachel leading a public awareness campaign, the Kenyan government tabled and passed one of Africa's most comprehensive tobacco control laws.

Any lingering doubts Rachel had about forgoing that corner office disappeared that day in Kenyan parliament.

"It felt more satisfying to be having an impact on ordinary people's lives than defending corporate interests," Rachel says.

Rachel still counts that day as her greatest legal victory, but it's now one many significant achievements as an advocate, mentor, and – since 2014 – the McCabe Centre for Law & Cancer's Regional Coordinator for Africa.

These achievements have earned her an international reputation as a hard-working and passionate advocate for preventing and controlling cancer and noncommunicable diseases (NCDs). And now, Rachel has been recognised by the World Health Organization (WHO) for her outstanding work with a [World No Tobacco Day 2020 Award](#).

"This award caps more than 15 years of changing the world, one tobacco control law at a time," Rachel says.

Tobacco control in Africa has changed quite a bit since Rachel's early days. She was one of the first lawyers in Kenya to dedicate her career to reducing the harms caused by tobacco, but now more people from various sectors are making it their full-time work.

There is also more coordination among these different sectors, and Rachel is largely responsible. She helped found the Kenya Tobacco Control Alliance and was the first Chair of the African Tobacco Control Alliance. She has also helped non-governmental organisations in Botswana, Uganda, Sierra Leone, Gambia and Zambia secure program funding, and worked with WHO and other organisations to convene meetings that helped develop tobacco control action plans in 15 countries.

"Alliance building is not always easy, but we have been able to bring in lawyers, economists, researchers, law enforcers, former tobacco farmers, community-based organisations and media practitioners. This has enriched our tobacco control policies," Rachel says.



Rachel Kitonyo Devotsu won a World No Tobacco Day 2020 Award

Teaching and mentorship are also hallmarks of Rachel's career. From 2010 to 2013, she mentored future leaders through the Africa Tobacco Control Consortium. She also coordinated with WHO's Regional Office for Africa to lead training sessions on tobacco control capacity-building for government lawyers across the continent. And since 2014, she has helped train more than 150 government lawyers and policymakers in low- and middle-income countries through the McCabe Centre's [International Legal Training Program](#) (ILTP).

She also provides technical support through the McCabe Centre's work as a Knowledge Hub on legal challenges to the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control. The guidance she provided to more than 40 African ILTP alumni has helped them go on to their own accomplishments addressing tobacco use, alcohol consumption, and healthy diets – to name a few. This includes an important tobacco control decision in Kenya, where an alumnus Rachel supported helped [successfully defend Kenyan tobacco control regulations](#) in the country's Supreme Court last year.

“Rachel is a tremendous lawyer and mentor whose energy and integrity inspire everyone she comes into contact with,” says Hayley Jones, Acting Director of the McCabe Centre.

This award is not Rachel's first international recognition. In 2009, she was honoured with the Judy

Wilkenfeld Award for International Tobacco Control Excellence from the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids.

Though awards are a good chance to reflect on past accomplishments, Rachel's eyes are firmly set on the future. She believes youth are the key to having a greater impact on tobacco use moving forward – a sentiment echoed in the [theme of this year's World No Tobacco Day](#).

Africa's large young population presents its own unique challenges, Rachel says. Even as overall smoking rates drop, young people continue to pick up the habit. Rachel says that tackling youth smoking in Africa will call for increased commitment to tobacco taxation, since tax rates on tobacco in Africa are still relatively low.

Though there is plenty of work to be done, Rachel thinks the future of tobacco control in Africa is bright. And she has every intention to be part of that future. In fact, she can't quit.

“Smoking is addictive, but so too is tobacco control,” she says. “It spurs me to continue with the fight.”