

## Combating Illicit Trade in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

### Executive Summary

Illicit tobacco trade in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) poses a growing threat to public health, fiscal revenues, and national governance. Weak border controls, limited enforcement capacity, and the absence of a digital track-and-trace system enable illicit tobacco products to circulate widely. The 2023 Development Gateway: An IREX Venture's illicit cigarette trade study estimates that 8.6% of cigarettes sold in the DRC are illicit—mostly originating from Uganda and the United Arab Emirates, which together account for 84% of the illicit market. Provincial disparities are significant, with Ituri (31.6%) and Sankuru (25.9%) showing the highest prevalence, compared to Tshopo (0.7%) and Haut-Katanga (1.0%) with the lowest.

Illicit trade results in substantial revenue losses, weakens tobacco control policies, exposes consumers to unregulated products, and fuels criminal networks. To address this challenge, the DRC must urgently ratify and implement WHO FCTC Article 15 and the Protocol to Eliminate Illicit Trade in Tobacco Products. Strengthened customs oversight, regional cooperation, a digital track-and-trace system, and public awareness campaigns are critical to disrupting illicit supply chains and safeguarding public health and national revenues.

### Overview of the research and findings

- **8.6%** of cigarette packs collected nationwide were illicit (no tax stamp).
- Highest prevalence found in border provinces, especially: Ituri – 31.6% and Sankuru – 25.9%, while the lowest prevalence were Haut-Katanga – 0.98% and Tshopo – 0.72%.
- Illicit cigarettes were found in both urban and rural areas, but prevalence was **higher in border and transit areas** linked to informal cross-border trade.
- **Fixed retailers** were the largest source of problematic packs (60.98%) (including those with outdated yellow stamps and missing health warnings). Mobile retailers (18.12%) and garbage cans (21.31%) also contributed significantly but at lower levels.



- **Imported cigarettes**, particularly those from Uganda, India, South Sudan, and the UAE, showed the highest stamp evasion, with most products from the first three countries unstamped and about 50% of UAE-origin cigarettes missing tax stamps.
- About **7.98%** of cigarette packs lacked the mandatory health warnings, **5.63%** had no message prohibiting sales to minors, and **4.54%** did not display nicotine and tar information.
- Several unauthorized or non-compliant brands were identified such as; Bharath Special beedies, Oris Slims Double Apple, Winston, Feuille d'Or, Cruiyen, Norging.

### Points of entry of illicit cigarettes in the DRC

According to the *Direction Générale des Douanes et Accises*' data (2021) on the importation of tobacco products into the DRC;

- **71.35%** of tobacco products enter through the **port of Matadi**.
- **9.44%** of tobacco products pass through the **Kasumbalesa border**.
- **Lubumbu (8.08%), Kasindi (3.96%), and Kinshasa (2.06%)** are other major points through which illicit tobacco products enter the Congolese territory.



### Policy Options/Scenarios

To effectively combat illicit tobacco trade in the DRC, policymakers can consider several strategic pathways that differ in ambition, cost, and implementation complexity.



**Maintain the Status Quo:** Continue applying existing laws and enforcement measures without major reforms.

### OPTION 1

#### ADVANTAGES

No additional financial or administrative burden.

#### DISADVANTAGES

Allows illicit trade to expand, further reducing tax revenue and undermining health policy.

#### IMPACT

**Low** — limited deterrence and continued market penetration of illegal products.



**Strengthen Border and Market Enforcement:** Enhance customs surveillance, deploy scanning technologies, and increase penalties against traffickers and complicit distributors.

### OPTION 2

#### ADVANTAGES

Builds immediate deterrence and improves detection at key entry points (Matadi, Kasumbalesa, Lubumbashi).

#### DISADVANTAGES

Requires sustained funding, equipment, and coordination between the DGDA, police, and judiciary.

#### IMPACT

**Moderate to High** — effective when institutional capacity and resources are ensured.



**Ratify and Implement the WHO FCTC Protocol:** Ratify and enforce the Protocol to Eliminate Illicit Trade in Tobacco Products under Article 15 of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control.

### OPTION 3

#### ADVANTAGES

Establishes a clear legal basis for traceability, regional cooperation, and international support.

#### DISADVANTAGES

Requires parliamentary approval and inter-ministerial coordination.

#### IMPACT

**High** — provides a sustainable framework for long-term reduction of illicit trade.





**OPTION 4**



**Introduce a National Digital Track-and-Trace System**

**recommended by the WHO:** Develop a digital platform to monitor all tobacco products from production or import to retail, ensuring tax compliance.

**ADVANTAGES**

Improves transparency, increases revenue collection, and discourages illicit distribution.

**DISADVANTAGES**

High initial investment and need for technical capacity building.

**IMPACT**

**High — long-term:** structural reform with measurable fiscal benefits.

**OPTION 5**



**Regional and Public Engagement Strategy:** Foster cross-border collaboration to harmonize taxation and anti-smuggling measures, while engaging citizens through awareness campaigns on the harms of illicit trade.

**ADVANTAGES**

Promotes cooperation and civic vigilance; reduces demand for illegal products.

**DISADVANTAGES**

Requires sustained communication efforts and regional political will.

**IMPACT**

**Sustainable —** strengthens public accountability and regional cohesion.

**Preferred Scenario According to the WHO FCTC**

A combined approach (Options 2, 3, and 4) — simultaneously enhancing enforcement, ratifying the WHO Protocol, and deploying a digital track-and-trace system, offers the most comprehensive and realistic pathway to reduce illicit tobacco trade in the DRC.





## Key Recommendations

- The DRC should ratify the WHO Protocol for the Elimination of Illicit Trade in Tobacco Products.
- Control and security measures should be reinforced at all borders. Prosecution of offenders should be publicised to deter potential defaulters.
- The DRC should collaborate with neighbouring countries to reduce cross-border price differentials and illicit trade, through establishment of an inter-country monitoring team.
- The customs authority should establish a digital track-and-trace system for all tobacco products manufactured or imported into the DRC.
- Encourage citizens participation in curbing illicit trade through public awareness on the dangers of illicit cigarette trade for the country.
- Ensure surveillance of illicit trade through regular independent research to enable evidence-based policy for regulating illicit trade, as well as to quantify policy impacts



## Conclusion

Illicit tobacco trade in the DRC poses serious challenges to public health, fiscal revenues, and governance, with border provinces disproportionately affected. Evidence from the 2023 Development Gateway: An IREX Venture's study highlights the urgent need for coordinated action, including strengthened enforcement, regional cooperation, and the adoption of a digital track-and-trace system.

Ratifying and implementing the WHO FCTC Protocol provides a legal and institutional framework to sustainably combat smuggling. Public awareness and citizen engagement are essential to reducing demand for illicit products. A combined strategy addressing legal, technological, and social dimensions offers the most effective path to safeguard health, secure revenue, and disrupt criminal networks in the long term.





For references and more information on illicit cigarette trade in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, visit, <https://drc.tobaccocontroldata.org/en/home/commerce-illicite/>

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Information on current adult prevalence of tobacco consumption by product, gender, age, rural/urban area, level of education, socio-economic status and province.

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Presentation of primary research results about adolescent tobacco and nicotine use in DRC.

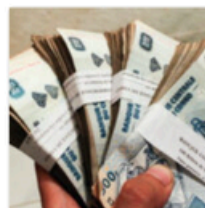
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An overview of the country's smoke-free legislation, its history, application and future prospects.

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### Taxation

The share of taxes and the structure of cigarette taxes in the DRC compared with other countries, as well as their evolution over time.

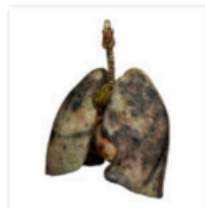
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### Industry Interference

Information on the structure of the tobacco market and recommendations for tobacco industry interference in the DRC.

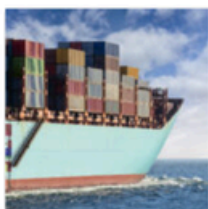
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This page highlights actionable pathways for the DRC to reduce tobacco and nicotine use and exposure across the population, starting well before initiation.

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This page is designed to equip decision-makers with the essential knowledge and policy tools needed to take effective action against tobacco use, in alignment with the WHO FCTC guidelines.

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