

# Protecting tobacco control from tobacco industry interference

## Tobacco industry interests

The tobacco industry seeks to undermine tobacco control efforts. As more countries move to fully meet their obligations under the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), the tobacco industry's attempts to subvert the Convention are becoming increasingly energetic. This poses a serious danger to public health.

Tobacco products are the only legally available products that can kill up to half their regular users if consumed as recommended by the manufacturer. There is a fundamental and irreconcilable conflict between the tobacco industry's interests and public health policy interests. The WHO FCTC therefore recognizes the need to protect public health from the efforts of the tobacco industry to undermine or subvert tobacco control and the need to be informed of industry activities that have a negative impact on tobacco control.

## Strategies to resist tobacco control

A growing body of global evidence reveals the strategies the tobacco industry uses to resist tobacco control. The efforts of the tobacco industry to undermine tobacco control in the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region have a long history and are well documented. Tobacco companies have strategized to infiltrate lucrative markets, create a socially acceptable climate for tobacco use and subvert tobacco control policies. The tobacco industry has:

- ▶ set up trade associations such as the Middle East Working Group and the Middle East Tobacco Association to defend its interests and fight tobacco control in the Region;
- ▶ engaged in public relations and lobbying of decision-makers, often using front groups and artificially-created grassroots movements;

- ▶ lobbied and manipulated the media and advertising associations to plant pro-tobacco stories and threaten the loss of advertising revenues.

The tobacco industry has also attempted to weaken tobacco control legislation, such as bans on smoking in enclosed public places, tax increases, product regulation and prohibitions on tobacco advertising, promotion and sponsorship. It fought Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) policies to regulate cigarette contents and lobbied Egyptian and Pakistani policy-makers, and the King's entourage in Morocco, to oppose tobacco control measures and ensure industry-friendly policies. In recognition of these activities, the League of Arab States and the member countries of the GCC have adopted resolutions calling upon countries to monitor the activities of the industry.

## Tactics to undermine tobacco control

The tobacco industry employs many devious tactics to subvert efforts by countries in tobacco control. For example it:

- ▶ promotes policies that undermine effective tobacco control such as having designated smoking areas, voluntary marketing codes of practice and industry self-regulation;
- ▶ challenges and conceals scientific evidence on the health problems caused by tobacco use and attempts to manipulate scientific meetings on the subject;
- ▶ tries to engage in alliances within governance structures to exploit the differing priorities of different government bodies and protect its interests;
- ▶ monitors and tries to infiltrate its opponents, including the GCC Health Ministers' Council and the World Health Organization.



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## Attempts to manipulate public opinion

Tobacco companies also pursue so-called “corporate social responsibility” activities to promote their brands, enhance their corporate image and get around restrictions on advertising. This includes donations to charities, sponsorship of sports such as cricket and football and “youth smoking prevention” initiatives.

In the Region, the industry has also attempted to manipulate Islamic religious opinion by trying to get religious leaders to oppose tobacco control, making charitable donations to Islamic institutions and promoting so-called ‘light’ brands during Ramadan.

## Complicity in the illicit trade in tobacco

The tobacco industry has been complicit in cigarette smuggling in order to undermine public tobacco monopolies, weaken government attempts to tax cigarettes and create new markets for their brands. In particular, it has targeted countries such as the Islamic Republic of Iran, Iraq and Pakistan.

## Best practices and the way forward

Article 5.3 of the WHO FCTC requires countries to protect their tobacco control policies from the vested interests of the tobacco industry. It is vital that all dealings with the tobacco industry are accountable and transparent, the tobacco industry

itself acts in an accountable and transparent way, and that the tobacco industry should not be granted any incentives. Parties to the Convention should undertake the following actions.

- ▶ Raise awareness about the addictive and harmful nature of tobacco products and about tobacco industry interference with countries’ tobacco control policies.
- ▶ Establish measures to limit interactions with the tobacco industry and ensure the accountability and transparency of those interactions that occur.
- ▶ Reject partnerships and non-binding or unenforceable industry self-regulation agreements with the tobacco industry.
- ▶ Avoid conflicts of interest for government officials and employees.
- ▶ Require that information provided by the tobacco industry be transparent and accurate.
- ▶ De-normalize and regulate activities described as “socially responsible” by the tobacco industry, including activities described as “corporate social responsibility”.
- ▶ Not give preferential treatment to the tobacco industry.
- ▶ Monitor, counter and document the practices of the tobacco industry to interfere with public health policy-making.
- ▶ Treat state-owned tobacco industry in the same way as any other tobacco industry.