



STOPPING TOBACCO  
ORGANIZATIONS & PRODUCTS

COVID-19  
Monitoring  
Brief



Global



# STOP COVID-19 Monitoring Brief: The tobacco industry, its interests and allies

**Edition 9:** August/September  
— Focus on Corporate Social  
Responsibility

September 21, 2020

**In response to the changing situation around COVID-19 and feedback from readers, the monitoring brief is now in a monthly format covering the previous 4 weeks' developments, followed by a report focussed on a particular aspect of industry response over the course of the pandemic.**

**Previous editions of the STOP COVID-19 Monitoring Brief are now available on the [COVID-19 Tobacco Tactics resource page](#).**

## Developments in the July/August monitoring period

### Science of Smoking and COVID-19

- The Italian Centre of Excellence for the Acceleration of Harm Reduction (CoEHAR), funded by the Foundation for a Smoke Free World, is running an antibody study to investigate the relationship between smoking and COVID-19.<sup>1</sup>
- A joint German/Turkish systematic review of the effect of smoking on COVID-19 found that “Active smoking and a history of smoking are clearly associated with severe COVID-19.”<sup>2</sup>
- A review from the University of Rochester Medical Centre indicates higher risk of COVID-19 infection and severity in smokers and vapers, caused by smoking/vaping related changes in ACE2 receptors and lung inflammation.<sup>3</sup>

### Tobacco Product Regulation and illicit trade

- In Bhutan, a ban on tobacco products that was first introduced in 2010 has been lifted “to temper demand for smuggled cigarettes”.<sup>4</sup>
- Japan Tobacco International (JTI) is calling for “stiffer sanctions” against illicit tobacco trade in the Philippines. The company claims tobacco smuggling has increased during COVID-19. This may be a tactic to counter regulation damaging to the tobacco industry.<sup>5</sup>

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## CSR and business strategy

- A COVID-19 testing scheme in the Philippines is being partly funded by Universal Leaf<sup>6</sup>, supplier of tobacco to PMI in the Philippines.<sup>7</sup>
- BAT is promoting its partnership with McLaren Racing by praising McLaren's production of ventilators and medical supplies during COVID-19.<sup>8</sup>
- A Thai COVID-19 vaccine synthesised using tobacco plants has proved successful in animal trials. This programme is not related to the tobacco industry, but the research may be of interest to tobacco companies.<sup>9</sup>
- BAT sales are up 22% in Zimbabwe, compared to this time last year, despite 3% drop in sales volume<sup>10</sup> and economic struggles for the country and Zimbabwean tobacco farmers.<sup>11</sup>

### Additional Resources

- **The WHO Eastern Mediterranean Regional Office:** [Advancing tobacco control during the COVID-19 pandemic](#)
- **The Conversation:** [Why vaping may increase your risk of developing COVID-19](#)
- **The Swiss Association for Smoking Prevention** have produced [fact sheets and videos \(in 5 languages\) to help smokers during COVID-19](#)
- **Tobacco Tactics:** [Tobacco Smuggling](#)
- **GGTC's list of COVID-19 related bans and contemplated bans** per country: [Bans/ Contemplated Bans on Tobacco/ Vaping Products](#)
- **The Union: COVID-19** – Bi-weekly brief on the science of smoking and COVID-19 under FAQ's section
- [STOP COVID-19 action center](#)

### In Focus: Corporate Social Responsibility During The Pandemic

## CSR and the WHO FCTC

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has become an increasingly important tool for the tobacco industry to exert influence. CSR helps the industry improve its reputation, distance itself from the harms of its products and gain access to policymakers to influence

regulation.<sup>12</sup> These goals have been of particular concern during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The World Health Organisation's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control specifically warns against this industry behaviour in article 5.3. The article states:

"Denormalize and, to the extent possible, regulate activities described as "socially responsible" by the tobacco industry, including but not limited to activities described as "corporate social responsibility"."<sup>13</sup>

## COVID-19: Vaccines and donations

The pandemic has provided ample opportunity for the industry to challenge article 5.3 and engage with governments whilst improving their image, taking advantage of international desperation.

Tobacco companies have used the situation to promote themselves as pharmaceutical and public health organisations, rather than cigarette manufacturers. For example, Kentucky BioProcessing, a wholly owned subsidiary of BAT, has received international press coverage for its ongoing development of a coronavirus vaccine using tobacco plants.<sup>14</sup> PMI also has a 40% stake in Medicago's vaccine development programme, which it uses to promote its own business.<sup>15</sup>

A vaccine for COVID-19 is something the world cannot turn down and so tobacco companies' investment in vaccine development forces governments to engage with the industry and contravene the WHO FCTC, whilst also washing the industry's reputation. A recent survey by the PMI funded Foundation for a Smoke-Free World assessing attitudes and compliance with COVID-19 vaccination is another example of industry and its front groups attempting to align with public health and vaccination programmes.<sup>16</sup>

Every major tobacco company has made donations of either money, food or medical equipment (including ventilators)<sup>17</sup> to COVID-19 relief efforts.<sup>18</sup> PMI stated that it has donated over US\$30 million during the crisis.<sup>19</sup> In 2017 PMI made profits of \$6.021 billion.

That same year, 8 million people were killed by tobacco products,<sup>20</sup> mostly in low- and middle-income countries (LMIC's).<sup>21</sup> In addition to these deaths is the economic costs of tobacco as a result of tax avoidance<sup>22</sup> and the impacts of smoking on healthcare systems. In Bangladesh tobacco induced disease cost the economy an estimated \$3.6 billion.<sup>23</sup> It is for this reason that much of the COVID-19 CSR campaigning has taken place in low- and middle-income countries like Bangladesh.<sup>24</sup> The industry wants to avoid regulation and avoid being held to financial account in its most profitable markets.

### CSR targets vulnerable countries

The contradiction and opportunism of industry CSR activities during the pandemic are well illustrated in the Global Center for Good Governance in Tobacco Control monitoring of [Tobacco Industry's COVID Donations vs Economic Cost of Tobacco](#). CSR donations occur in countries with high economic costs from tobacco. Low- and Middle- income countries make up a majority of those listed, as do countries with high levels of tobacco industry interference according to the Global Tobacco Industry Interference Index.<sup>25</sup> A majority of CSR activity included in these STOP briefings has also occurred in LMIC's.

CSR behaviour during the pandemic has been described in a letter published in Tobacco Prevention and Cessation as a "Trojan Horse",<sup>26</sup> helping Big Tobacco to 'wash' its reputation and challenge tobacco regulation, pre-empting calls for higher taxation and financial reparations for the harms caused by their products. It is time for the tobacco industry to help pay for the economic damage caused by this deadly lung disease.<sup>27</sup>

### Additional Resources

- **GGTC's [list](#) of country specific tobacco industry donations** during COVID-19 between March and June 2020.
- **Tobacco Tactics:** [CSR Strategy](#)
- **Tobacco Tactics:** [CSR: Health](#)
- **STOP:** [As Costs Pile Up for COVID-19, Tobacco Companies Should Be Held Accountable for Smoking-Related Health Harms](#)
- **PROACTT:** [The Cost of Tobacco Use Is Rising In Bangladesh](#)
- [Global Tobacco Industry Interference Index 2019](#)

### Get in touch

We welcome any contributions on issues mentioned in this update or anything related to COVID-19 and the Tobacco Industry. Contact us at [bath@exposetobacco.org](mailto:bath@exposetobacco.org).

STOP's Rapid Engaged Action Team (REACT) supports governments and advocates facing challenges from the tobacco industry on crucial policy debates. [Request help](#)

Visit the [Tobacco Tactics COVID-19](#) page for further information.

## Endnotes

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