



TOBACCO INDUSTRY TACTICS UNDERMINING TOBACCO CONTROL IN THE AFRICAN REGION

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Abstract

This desk review explores how the tobacco industry actively interferes with the development and implementation of progressive tobacco control legislation across Africa. At the heart of this interference are tactics rooted in misleading, exaggerated, or false arguments designed to delay, weaken, or prevent policy change. These strategies are driven by the industry's view that strong tobacco regulations threaten its profits, growth, and long-term survival.

Despite increasing awareness of the health harms of tobacco and the global momentum created by the **WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC)**, the tobacco industry remains relentless in its efforts to undermine public health initiatives, particularly by targeting young people and downplaying the severe health consequences of tobacco use.

Drawing on credible sources, including WHO reports and reputable public health platforms such as Tobacco Tactics, this research identifies and analyzes the key tactics the industry employs to interfere with policy processes. **It highlights how these actions continue to create significant obstacles to effective tobacco control in Africa.** Ultimately, the paper provides a critical lens on the industry's strategies and their impact on the continent's progress toward stronger, evidence-based tobacco regulation.



Introduction

In recent decades, smoking prevalence in developed nations has significantly declined due to robust tobacco control measures, heightened public awareness, and stringent regulatory frameworks. These restrictions, combined with increased awareness of smoking's harmful effects and growing recognition of the ethically questionable practices of tobacco companies, have resulted in decreased tobacco sales in Europe, Australia, North America, and Latin America (Euromonitor International, 2014). However, this positive trend has inadvertently redirected the global tobacco industry's focus towards vulnerable markets, predominantly in the developing world. Among these markets, the African region emerges as particularly susceptible, characterized by rapidly growing youth populations and often underdeveloped regulatory landscapes.

Researchers, including Grobbelaar (1993), have long argued that Africa has become a strategic target for tobacco companies seeking to replenish profits lost in developed nations. The World Health Organization (WHO) and academic institutions such as the University of Bath have extensively documented the industry's aggressive marketing strategies, exploitation of regulatory loopholes, and direct interference in policymaking across the continent.

These tactics include targeting women and young people through deceptive marketing practices and exploiting corporate social responsibility initiatives to mask their true agenda.



Furthermore, evidence shows that tobacco companies actively undermine public health measures through lobbying, intimidation of government officials, and strategic sponsorship of educational and community programs designed to foster dependence, gain favor from the public and normalize tobacco use. Despite significant progress in implementing tobacco control policies as outlined by WHO's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), persistent interference by the tobacco industry continues to pose considerable challenges. This paper explores the multifaceted tactics employed by the tobacco industry within the African context, critically examining their impact on public health and policy implementation.

Tactics Deployed by the Tobacco Industry to Undermine Effective Tobacco Control in Africa

The tobacco industry consistently and aggressively opposes proven tobacco control measures known to effectively reduce smoking, such as increased taxes on tobacco products, comprehensive smoke-free legislation (banning smoking in public areas), plain cigarette packaging, and graphic health warnings on tobacco packs. Instead, the industry favors strategies with minimal or negligible impact on smoking prevalence, including traditional school-based health education programs and voluntary restrictions on tobacco sales to minors. Historically, the tobacco industry has utilized various targeted tactics to influence and shape Africa's tobacco control policy landscape, prominently including:



Social Corporate Responsibility Tactics

The tobacco industry continues to portray itself as a responsible and reformed corporate actor by promoting voluntary measures and corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives. These efforts often include partnerships with health oriented organizations, aiming to present the industry as a contributor to societal good rather than a threat to public health (Freudenberg, 2014). At the center of this strategy is the use of Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) frameworks. ESG is a widely recognized model used to assess a company's environmental impact, social responsibility, and ethical governance. Increasingly, tobacco companies are turning to ESG reporting to gain credibility and approval from investors, policymakers, and the general public (Tobacco Tactics, 2023).

As noted by the World Health Organization and platforms like Tobacco Tactics, this use of ESG is far from harmless. Instead, it serves as a strategic tool to obscure the harmful realities of the tobacco industry's core business, the production and marketing of products that are inherently dangerous to human health. By promoting selective narratives about sustainability or social investment, tobacco companies attempt to create the illusion of positive transformation, while continuing to expand their markets, especially in low- and middle income countries (WHO FCTC Secretariat, 2021; Tobacco Tactics, 2023). Peer reviewed research from public health journals highlights that these CSR and ESG efforts by tobacco companies do more harm than good in the context of tobacco control.

Such activities often provide the industry with a seat at policy tables where they can influence legislation, weaken or delay regulatory action, and build alliances that legitimize their operations. This tactic ultimately obstructs the progress of public health initiatives aimed at reducing tobacco use and its devastating health impacts (Freudenberg, 2014; WHO FCTC Secretariat, 2021; Tobacco Tactics, 2023).





Harm Reduction Arguments

The tobacco industry also strategically employs harm reduction arguments to influence and weaken tobacco control policies. By promoting products such as e-cigarettes, heated tobacco products, and other novel nicotine delivery systems as safer alternatives to traditional cigarettes, the industry positions itself as a partner in public health. However, according to the World Health Organization and the Tobacco Control Research Group at the University of Bath, these harm reduction narratives are often misleading. They are used to delay stronger regulatory measures, maintain social acceptability, and distract from the health risks associated with all tobacco and nicotine products (WHO, 2021; Tobacco Tactics, 2023).

Furthermore, industry funded research and front groups are frequently employed to support these harm reduction claims, creating a false sense of scientific consensus. This undermines independent public health messaging and contributes to regulatory confusion, especially in countries with limited technical capacity to evaluate industry claims (Tobacco Tactics, 2023; Bialous & Glantz, 2020).





Using third parties and front groups

The use of front groups is another well documented strategy employed by the tobacco industry to influence public policy while concealing its direct involvement. A front group is an organization that appears independent but is in fact backed by another party with hidden interests often the tobacco industry itself. These groups are strategically mobilized to represent farmers, retailers, advertisers, hospitality associations, grassroots movements, and anti tax advocates. Their goal is to give the impression of broad-based opposition to tobacco control, thereby influencing legislative processes (Tobacco Tactics, 2023).



Because the tobacco industry is often excluded from formal public health policymaking spaces due to conflict of interest guidelines such as those outlined in Article 5.3 of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, it relies heavily on front groups to push its agenda indirectly. These groups are used to advocate against tobacco taxes, plain packaging,

and advertising restrictions while framing such opposition as grassroots concern rather than industry interference (WHO FCTC Secretariat, 2021; Tobacco Tactics, 2023).



When given the opportunity, the tobacco industry capitalizes on any access to decision makers or public forums to advance its commercial interests. It uses these moments to promote misleading narratives around economic harm, job loss, and infringement of personal freedoms tactics aimed at stalling or diluting progressive public health policies (Freudenberg, 2014; Tobacco

Tactics, 2023).

The tobacco industry also relies heavily on intimidation, litigation, and lobbying to advance its interests and block effective tobacco control. Intimidation is used to silence or discredit public health advocates, researchers, and policymakers who support strong regulation. This may involve legal threats, public defamation, or surveillance, creating a



Intimidation , Litigation and Lobbying



hostile environment that discourages opposition (WHO, 2021).

Litigation is another powerful tool in the industry's arsenal. Tobacco companies frequently challenge public health laws in domestic and international courts, aiming to delay implementation or force governments into costly legal battles. These lawsuits often target policies such as graphic health warnings, plain packaging, and advertising bans (Tobacco Tactics, 2023). Even when the industry ultimately loses, the legal process itself serves as a deterrent for low and middle income countries that may lack the financial resources to defend their laws.

Lobbying remains one of the industry's most persistent strategies. Through well funded networks and political connections, the tobacco industry works to influence legislation behind closed doors. It builds alliances with key government officials, shapes the language of regulatory drafts, and offers incentives or makes deals to secure favorable outcomes (Freudenberg, 2014; WHO FCTC Secretariat, 2021).

Together, these strategies reflect the tobacco industry's systematic effort to use its economic and legal power to manipulate the political environment and undermine global



Sponsorship, Media, and Influencer Tactics

tobacco control efforts.

Another influential tactic used by the tobacco industry is its strategic use of sponsorships, media campaigns, and celebrity endorsements to shape public opinion and gain social legitimacy. Tobacco companies have long invested in arts, sports, humanitarian causes, and cultural initiatives as a way to align their brands with positive societal values and distract from the harm caused by their products. These sponsorships help the industry appear as a socially responsible corporate actor while simultaneously normalizing tobacco use in public life (Tobacco Tactics, 2023).

In the digital age, the industry has expanded its reach through targeted advertising on social media platforms. Using sleek, youth-oriented branding, tobacco companies promote their products through sponsored posts, contests, and influencer partnerships often skirting regulations that prohibit direct advertising. This strategy is particularly dangerous because it reaches young people where they spend most of their time and subtly shapes perceptions around smoking and nicotine use as glamorous, modern, or rebellious (WHO, 2021; Tobacco Tactics, 2023). Celebrity and influencer endorsements further amplify this tactic. By associating tobacco products with popular figures, the industry leverages their influence to build brand loyalty, especially among

young and impressionable audiences. These efforts are part of a broader public relations strategy to create a positive image of tobacco companies and counteract tobacco control efforts (Freudenberg, 2014).

Altogether, these marketing and sponsorship strategies allow the tobacco industry to “buy” cultural relevance, deflect criticism, and create





Tobacco Taxation

environments where tobacco use is normalized rather than discouraged.

A common scare tactic used by the tobacco industry is the exaggerated claim that increases in tobacco taxes directly cause a surge in illicit trade. This narrative is frequently used to discourage governments from implementing tobacco tax reforms, despite substantial evidence to the contrary. According to the WHO Technical Manual on Tobacco Tax Policy and Administration (2021), these arguments are misleading and designed to protect industry profits under the guise of economic concern.

Rather than presenting valid data, tobacco companies frequently rely on overstated or industry funded estimates of illicit trade to instill fear among policymakers and the public. By framing tax increases as harmful to the economy, job security, and state revenue, the industry creates a false dilemma that pits public health against economic stability (WHO, 2021; Tobacco Tactics, 2023). This tactic is especially effective in low and middle income countries, where government institutions may lack the resources to independently verify such claims.

Independent studies and WHO guidelines consistently show that well-designed tax policies, when paired with strong enforcement mechanisms, do not significantly increase illicit trade. In fact, higher tobacco taxes remain one of the most effective tools for reducing tobacco use and

generating revenue for health programs (WHO, 2021). Nonetheless, the tobacco industry continues to push this scare narrative to delay or prevent the adoption of life saving fiscal measures.

The tobacco industry has a long and persistent history of undermining tobacco control efforts across Africa.



Discussion

Through a combination of public relations strategies, scare tactics, litigation, lobbying, and digital marketing, the industry has consistently sought to delay or weaken progressive legislation that would reduce tobacco use and protect public health. It has exaggerated the risks of taxation, promoted misleading narratives about harm reduction, and manipulated cultural and political landscapes to serve its own interests.

One of the most dangerous aspects of the industry's strategy is its focus on young people. By targeting youth through social media, influencer partnerships, and glamorous branding, the tobacco industry is deliberately cultivating the next generation of tobacco users. This is happening in regions where cessation services are scarce and health systems are already overburdened by noncommunicable diseases linked to tobacco use.

The situation is urgent. In 2013, approximately 77 million African adults smoked, if left unchecked, this number is projected to rise to more than 572 million by the end of the century (Blecher & Ross, 2013). Without strong and enforceable tobacco control policies, including taxation, advertising bans, and protection from industry interference, Africa risks becoming the next epicenter of the global tobacco epidemic.

Conclusion

Tobacco control in Africa represents a critical public health priority. It involves safeguarding lives, strengthening health systems, and building a future where younger generations are free from tobacco related harm and preventable diseases. The evidence is clear, and the time for decisive action towards progressive tobacco control legislation in Africa is now.

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