



Bogota

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Tobacco industry is “talking trash” on environmental harms of production, say WHO and watchdog

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The harmful effects of tobacco on health are well documented. Fewer people in developed economies smoke each year in the knowledge that cigarettes kill up to one in two long term users, amounting to more than 8 million deaths each year.¹

The environmental impact of tobacco is less well known, however, and producers are working hard to keep it that way, said the World Health Organization and industry watchdog STOP at an event examining the tobacco industry’s “green” public relations on 12 May.

Some 32 million tonnes of tobacco leaf are used to make six trillion cigarettes a year, causing mass deforestation, water usage, and littering.¹ This emits more than 80 million tonnes of carbon dioxide and uses more than 22 billion cubic metres of water, studies estimate—often in countries where water supplies are limited.²

“Tobacco is not just poisoning people, it is poisoning our planet too,” said Rüdiger Krech, director of WHO’s Department of Health Promotion.

The 4.5 trillion cigarette butts littered each year are the most littered item on the planet, Krech added, and 70% of sea birds and 30% of sea turtles sampled have been found to have partially digested cigarette butts.

Yet “big tobacco” has secured a list of environmental awards which suggest the industry is a beacon of sustainability. British American Tobacco (BAT), the report pointed out, recently celebrated 20 years in Dow Jones’ Sustainability World Index, received a “gold standard” in one index of environmental, social, and governance (ESG) reporting, and received an award from the *Financial Times* for being a “climate leader.”

A lack of regulation and standardisation of ESG standards makes it easy for tobacco firms to present themselves as sustainable while polluting the earth, said WHO officials. ESG assessments assess the way companies operate and not their product, which means the waste caused by the tobacco crop and its refinement into cigarettes is largely disregarded.

Protocols for assessing a company’s ESG activity also vary from country to country, with little standardisation or disclosure requirements for reporting, meaning tobacco companies can choose to share only flattering data.³ Tobacco firms largely set their own sustainability goals and assessments; if assessments make them look bad they can drop them, as BAT, Japan Tobacco International, and Imperial Brands did when they received poor ratings from CDP Forestry on disclosure and impact in 2017.³

Meanwhile, big tobacco firms are running environmental campaigns—sometimes in cooperation with governments—to “greenwash” their image.

Cigarette producers are funding “green” activities from beach clean ups to disaster relief efforts, said the Tobacco Control Research Group at the University of Bath.⁴

Tobacco firms have worked with Brazil’s Ministry of the Environment on a programme to preserve the country’s forests; funded education, sanitation, and health through a partnership with a local district in India; and created a project to facilitate water access in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Senegal, among other green initiatives.

Companies are focusing their campaigns in low and middle income countries, which are more receptive to their funding and are growing tobacco markets.

“They do so in an attempt to portray themselves as a sustainable and eco friendly industry, but this couldn’t be further from the truth,” Krech said.

The greenwashing activities are typical of big tobacco, said researchers at campaign group Corporate Responsibility.

Most recently the pharmaceutical company GlaxoSmithKline was criticised for negotiating the manufacture of a plant based covid-19 vaccine with tobacco giant Philip Morris International (PMI).^{5,6} In March PMI were accused of manipulating scientists in advertisements in order to “healthwash” their image.⁷

According to Jaime Hernán Arcila Sierra, Latin America organiser for Corporate Accountability, firms are pledging a “smoke free future” while simultaneously looking for new markets and novel ways to market cigarettes.

The advocacy group recently investigated tobacco advertising in 43 countries for their Tiny Targets report and found that firms such as PMI are using loopholes to get around legal requirements and violating their promise to cease marketing tobacco products.

The report found that PMI and BAT were marketing their products visibly in the vicinity of primary and secondary schools in 86% of the countries investigated.⁸

In Colombia the promotion of tobacco products was banned in 2012, including at the point of sale, Arcila said. “But using displays is not prohibited explicitly, so the industry is using their display of tobacco products as a way to promote new brands and new flavours while gaining a new audience.”

PMI has pledged a “smoke free future” but “if you can see what they are doing in Colombia, there’s a huge contradiction,” Arcila said, pointing to the launch of the company’s new Marlboro Vista product, which he said is promoted aggressively in areas around schools with vibrant displays that are given to store owners free.⁹

Of the 196 shops and point of sales surveyed in Colombia, 96.4% had tobacco products visible at the points of sale and in 62.2% of cases health warnings were obscured.¹⁰ In more than half of those cases, the products were exhibited at eye level of young people and next to candy products. The displays often used bright colours and playful patterns comparable to those used for sweets and treats. Such displays were found across Latin America, from Argentina to Peru.

Considering that Colombia is party to WHO’s 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which includes the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, authorities should investigate the practices, Arcila said, and recognise that they are a form of marketing.

“Corporate propaganda may not get more over the top than the largest global cigarette corporation professing a devotion to ‘unsmoking’ our world,” Arcila added. “It’s a fantastical lie. And no matter how much it repeats it, it isn’t somehow becoming ‘truer.’ Colombia is only the most recent proof of as much.”

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