
Anti-tobacco civil society celebrates big win, urges all governments to reject partnerships with tobacco companies



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4 January 2023, Geneva - Civil society organizations welcome the expulsion of tobacco giant Philip Morris from Medicago Inc, the corporation involved in Canada's major government-backed COVID-19 vaccine collaboration. The news follows the [rejection of the Medicago Covifenz vaccine by the World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#) [1] in March 2022 due to the corporation's tobacco industry ties.

Tobacco control groups have argued that financing and approving any drug that has links to the tobacco industry violates the [WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control](#) [2] (WHO FCTC), a global public health treaty that came into force in 2005. The FCTC calls for tighter tobacco control and emphasizes the need for public health policies to be protected from commercial and other vested interests of the tobacco industry.

[The FCTC also prohibits tobacco industry collaborations](#) [3] among participating countries, which include Canada. The government of Canada has been openly defying this treaty requirement, despite the fact that [Canadian governments are currently suing the tobacco industry](#) [4] - including Philip Morris - for over US\$400 billion for healthcare treatment costs resulting from tobacco industry deception.

As more countries implement laws to reduce tobacco use, the tobacco industry is fighting back by challenging these measures under international trade and investment agreements. For instance, countries including [Australia and Uruguay are involved in international trade litigation brought on by the tobacco industry](#) [5], and dozens more have been threatened with legal action by tobacco companies or their representatives. These threats and lawsuits are aimed at discouraging countries from implementing life-saving tobacco control laws.

Moreover, as highlighted by the [Signalling Virtue, Promoting Harm report](#) [6], many health-harming industries - such as alcohol and ultra-processed foods as well as tobacco - took advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic to further promote their harmful products and improve their corporate image by taking part in 'solutions', including the tobacco industry supporting the development of COVID-19 vaccines in Canada.

"Over eight million people die each year due to tobacco use. There is a clear conflict of interest with the tobacco industry engaging in public health efforts, including vaccination," says Liz Arnanz, Policy and Advocacy Manager at the NCD Alliance. "This decision is a milestone and also a reminder that governments must remain vigilant and coherent about who they partner with in public health efforts to avoid incompatible collaborations that breach the Framework Convention and other agreements."

The world's deadliest commodity?

[Tobacco kills around 8.7 million people every year](#) [7] while up to US\$1.4 trillion are lost to healthcare spending and reduced worker productivity. Most of these deaths (7.4 million) are directly attributed to tobacco use, while the remaining 1.3 million relate to non-smokers exposed to second-hand smoke.

Growing affordability of cigarettes, lack of strong tobacco controls and efforts by the tobacco industry to establish new markets have also resulted in staggering [increases in smoking prevalence in some low-income](#) [8] countries despite the overall downward trend in the world. This is most notably the case in Africa.

In addition, many new challenges for tobacco control have emerged over the last few years. Ranging from youth use to the rise of new tobacco products, they cast doubt on the sustainability of the progress made. The percentage of the global population that smokes has been reduced from 22.7% in 2007 to 17.5% in 2019, but strengthening tobacco control measures is the only way to avoid a trend reversal.

Progress in tobacco control

Given the strong response of the tobacco industry following advances in legislation and regulation, it is more important than ever to continue to move forward and strengthen tobacco controls and counter this deadly offensive.

Most countries experienced their [largest decline in smoking prevalence](#) [9] during the decade following ratification of the FCTC. Although to date only two countries (Turkey and Brazil) have implemented all the control measures at best-practice level, [75% of countries and 5.3 billion people are now protected](#) [10] by at least one measure at the highest level. Major progress has been made in smoke-free legislation, health warning labels, taxation and bans, advertising and illicit tobacco trade. Yet, low-income countries continue to be the great absentees.

Following the inclusion of the FCTC in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 3.A) in 2015, the United Kingdom was joined by Australia and Norway under the FCTC 2030 project to support low- and middle-income countries in the implementation of the framework.

Bloomberg Philanthropies and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation also announced the creation of the [Anti-Tobacco Trade Litigation Fund](#) [11] in 2015. The fund supports low- and middle-income countries that have been sued by tobacco companies in arbitration under international trade agreements. The fund provides financial and technical assistance to governments committed to defending their laws to reduce tobacco use.

Tobacco industry interference has been identified as the [single largest barrier to the implementation of the FCTC](#) [12].

Post Date: Wednesday, 4 January, 2023

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- [5] <https://www.tobaccofreekids.org/what-we-do/global/legal/trade-and-investment/philip-morris-v-uruguay>
- [6] <https://ncdalliance.org/resources/signalling-virtue-promoting-harm>
- [7] <https://tobaccoatlas.org/challenges/health-effects/>
- [8] [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(15\)60312-9/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(15)60312-9/fulltext)
- [9] <https://www.thelancet.com/infographics-do/tobacco>
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