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Foundation For A Smoke-Free World Tax Return Suggests Little Has Changed But Its Name

Has the tobacco-funded organization truly cut ties with the industry?

It's official: One of the world's biggest industry front groups has changed its name. The Foundation for a Smoke-Free World (FSFW), bankrolled entirely by Philip Morris International, is now Global Action to End Smoking (GAES).

The name change [followed a promise](#) that the organization has “established a powerful new policy to not accept or seek any tobacco or nonmedicinal nicotine industry funding.”

However, nothing in the tax-exempt foundation's [bylaws](#) or [tax return](#) suggest GAES should be embraced by the tobacco control, public health and academic communities that have long rejected its predecessor's advances.

Still fully funded by Big Tobacco

In 2023, GAES accepted two donations totaling \$140 million from its lone donor, Philip Morris International (PMI). Leadership described the payout as [the product of a negotiation](#)—but failed to disclose what PMI got in return.

Transparency, of course, isn't the industry's strong suit, and tobacco control advocates have repeatedly seen tobacco companies hide behind supposed good deeds to clean up their reputations as dealers of death and disease.

GAES' stated focuses are “cessation education” and advancing the “field of tobacco harm reduction.” These align closely with [PMI rhetoric and dubious activity](#) that appear designed to promote their alternatives to cigarettes—namely heated-tobacco products (HTPs) and electronic cigarettes.

In April, Medscape [returned almost \\$3 million to PMI and cut ties](#) following backlash over a deal in which the website published PMI-sponsored learning content promoting the cigarette giant's version of harm reduction. Critics of the deal expressed outrage over the irreconcilable conflict of an industry whose products kill 8 million people a year being permitted to sponsor health education.

Bylaws do not prohibit information exchange, tobacco company investment

Despite leadership's public vow not to "accept or seek" tobacco money, that promise is not clearly defined in the group's bylaws, and its "scientific integrity" statement [contains no rule](#) barring GAES from "exchanging information or interacting with any third party" to advance its goals.

While GAES claims its grant-review process is independent, its [conflict of interest policy](#) has no requirement for appointees, employees, grant application reviewers or grant recipients to disclose direct or indirect ownership or investment in a tobacco or nicotine business, or a tobacco-reduction or -cessation company, unless the financial stake exceeds 5%.

For context, a 4.9% interest in a major tobacco company like PMI or Imperial Brands—which GAES rules seem to deem permissible—would be worth billions.

Where will GAES find funding now the deal is over?

When FSW launched, PMI said it would contribute \$80 million a year, about 1% of its profits, beginning in 2018. It [later reduced its annual pledge](#) to the failing foundation, and when the deal with PMI ended last year the organization had received a total of about \$407 million after the final infusion of \$140 million.

There's been little information on where future funding might come from, and [GAES has \\$184 million earmarked](#) for conditional grants through 2028.

Follow the money

The organization's [2023 grants](#), as in previous years, reflect priorities that line up with industry aims and public areas of concern:

- more than \$1.5 million on six grants dealing, at least in part, with the industry's definition of [harm reduction](#) in countries including Brazil, China, Egypt, Indonesia, Nepal, Pakistan, South Africa and Turkey;
- about \$1.4 million for a study of dual users of cigarettes and electronic nicotine delivery systems

(amid doubts over whether [smokers switching to e-cigarettes actually quit](#));

- \$448,981 to develop a waste management plan for "reduced-risk products" in the United Kingdom (as the industry faces questions about [toxic waste](#));
- and \$266,696 to study the economic and social effects of tobacco control in Mexico.

In addition, two grants in 2022 and 2023, totaling more than \$558,000, went to the [Alternative Research Institute](#), a Pakistan-based organization that has received FSW money to promote so-called harm reduction products. According to tax returns, the group has received almost \$1.1 million since 2018.

Another 2023 grantee, [Knowledge-Action-Change](#), provides scholarships to research "harm reduction" in low- and middle-income countries (LMIC). FSW has promised almost \$8 million in grants to the group, which organizes the [Global Forum on Nicotine](#), a conference with industry ties.

Claims to support farmers don't match farmers' accounts

Tax returns show FSW has spent millions—mostly with a U.S.-based company and an American university—related to agricultural diversification in Malawi, which it says will help farmers prepare for a drop in demand for leaf tobacco.

It [does not appear](#) the project has meaningfully impacted farmers' lives, as [a recent film, "Tobacco Slave,"](#) documents how tobacco farming in Malawi sickens farmers and the many children who work on these farms, while fueling a cycle of poverty.

The truth about tobacco industry and GAES rhetoric

As global smoking rates and cigarette sales fall, tobacco companies are working to grow sales of e-cigarettes and HTPs, while also spending considerable amounts to cast them as "[harm reduction](#)" products, [reminiscent of the industry's past deception](#) in promoting filtered, mild or low-tar cigarettes as safer alternatives.

Like FSFW, GAES [criticizes advocates and science](#) that challenge industry claims about these devices. Most experts concur the best way to reduce harm is for smokers to completely quit and for youth never to start.

GAES downplays impact on young people

The organization also seems to minimize the industry's impact on youth when the truth is [37 million children aged 13 to 15](#) already use tobacco, and, in many countries, they use e-cigarettes at higher rates than adults. GAES leadership claims advocacy efforts to protect children hinder options [to help adults quit smoking](#).

Meanwhile, the tobacco industry is [using flavors and sleek designs](#), and tapping [gaming and social media platforms](#), to reach youth—while [fighting legislation](#) that would protect them.

The products GAES is promoting are risky, [especially to children](#). That's because the nicotine in HTPs and e-cigarettes is still addictive, the devices still [deliver toxins](#), including carcinogens, and there are insufficient studies into short- and long-term effects. The general scientific consensus is [more research is needed](#) to determine if e-cigarettes are an effective means of quitting.

As the [World Health Organization put it](#): "There are many unanswered questions about tobacco harm reduction, but the research needed to answer these questions should not be funded by tobacco companies."

The problem with tobacco-funded groups

FSFW has produced tobacco-friendly research and opinion, obscured industry involvement in its research outputs and funded third parties that denigrate scientists who threaten industry profits.

The foundation also characterizes smoke-free environments, health warnings, advertising regulations and higher taxes—[all known to curb smoking rates](#)—as ineffective.

FSFW has [boasted about funding scholarships](#) and working in LMICs, while the tobacco industry targets younger and poorer people to [hook its next generation of users](#). Despite FSFW's promise to "take action" to stem smoking rates in LMICs, its previous tax returns show that [85% or more of its grant expenditures](#) went to the United States, U.K. and European Union.

The 2023 return further showed that of the almost \$62 million in spending on active grants, more than 90% was directed to the U.S., U.K., EU and New Zealand.

GAES actions don't appear aimed toward a "smoke-free" world

Perhaps more important is what GAES is not doing: It is not calling out tobacco companies for continuing to sell cigarettes or marketing to kids or opening new cigarette manufacturing plants or opposing policies proven to reduce smoking.

Promoting ["corporate social responsibility"](#) through funding or other links with organizations like GAES is simply how the tobacco industry seeks to boost its image and delay real change that would threaten its profits.

Even with the new name, GAES appears not so different from FSFW, which researchers with the Tobacco Control Research Group at the University of Bath just last year called [a "vehicle for agnogenesis"](#)—another word for purposefully created ignorance.

No one should be fooled: Despite its efforts to court credibility, there is no indication anyone interested in acting to end smoking should engage with GAES.



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About STOP (Stopping Tobacco Organizations and Products)

STOP is a global tobacco industry watchdog whose mission is to expose the tobacco industry tactics that undermine public health. Comprised of a network of academic and public health organizations, STOP researches and monitors the tobacco industry, shares intelligence to counter its tactics, and exposes its misdeeds to a global audience. STOP is funded by Bloomberg Philanthropies as part of the Bloomberg Initiative to Reduce Tobacco Use. For more information, visit [exposetobacco.org](#).