



STOPPING TOBACCO  
ORGANIZATIONS & PRODUCTS

Issue  
Brief



Global







# How Tobacco Industry Interference Hinders the UN Sustainable Development Goals






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**The tobacco industry's business is incompatible with the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) because it adversely impacts development areas including poverty, hunger, education, gender equality, economic growth and inequality. Human rights assessments call for the cessation of the production and marketing of tobacco, as it is irreconcilable with the human right to health enshrined in the UN's principles.**



Even so, the tobacco industry is attempting to use the SDGs as part of a fraudulent marketing scheme to detract global attention from the fact that it has yet to be held accountable for harms caused. The tobacco industry is trying to use the SDGs to increase acceptance of its new addictive and dangerous products, attract more investors, influence policymakers to rule in favor of the tobacco industry's commercial interests, access the UN and, effectively, undermine a key SDG target: implementation of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), which has provisions prohibiting so-called corporate social responsibility (CSR) from and partnerships with the tobacco industry.

Here is how the tobacco industry's actions undermine and hinder the achievement of the SDGs.

SDG	Tobacco companies claim to...	In reality, tobacco companies...
<b>1.</b> No poverty 	Contribute to the economy: “Lost tax revenues are a drain on public budgets and severely limit government ability to mobilize sufficient domestic tax revenue” <sup>1</sup>	<b>Resist tobacco taxes and earmarking for health in many countries.</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Tobacco use leads to chronic diseases that are costly to treat, causing a financial burden for families. Smokers with COVID-19 suffer more severe outcomes, which could lead to catastrophic health costs that plunge families further into poverty.</li></ul>
<b>2.</b> Zero hunger 	“Improve livelihood and food security of farmers” <sup>2</sup>	<b>Keep farmers in debt and perpetuate the poverty cycle.</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Tobacco farming strips the soil of nutrients to a greater extent and faster than other major food and cash crops.</li><li>Land used for tobacco instead of food contributes to food insecurity.</li><li>For tobacco users, costs of tobacco products take away income for necessities like food.</li></ul>
<b>3.</b> Good health and wellbeing 	Facilitate the “shift to selling so-called ‘less harmful’ alternatives” which supposedly “equates to helping attain health goals” <sup>3</sup>  Support a smoke-free vision (sale of heated tobacco products and emerging/novel products) that aligns with the SDGs	<b>Hamper government efforts to address the most preventable cause of death, disability and disease by selling tobacco products that kill over 8 million people each year.</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>They sell new, harmful and addictive products, marketing them in a manner that has led to young people initiating smoking and vaping, and preventing users from quitting, thus increasing tobacco use.</li></ul>
<b>4.</b> Quality education 	Provide funding for educational programs, especially in low- and middle-income countries	<b>Market tobacco in ways that have led young people to initiating smoking and vaping, and retain nicotine (which is more addictive than cocaine or heroin) as a key ingredient in their products, which damages adolescents’ brains.</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Tobacco products and exposure to second-hand smoke leads to learning problems/cognitive impairment among adolescents.</li><li>Tobacco use also results in children dropping out of school to take care of a sick relative or work to make up for lost wages.</li></ul>

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<p><b>5.</b> Gender equality</p> 	<p>"Empower and provide opportunity to women and girls in a diverse workforce of 82,000 people"<sup>4</sup></p>	<p><b>Target women and adolescents in their marketing.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women face gender-specific health risks from tobacco, such as the disproportionate burden of exposure to second-hand smoke and use during pregnancy.</li> </ul>
<p><b>6.</b> Clean water &amp; sanitation</p> 	<p>Promote water recycling, protect watersheds, and promote sustainable water management</p>	<p><b>Pollute waterways and threaten aquatic life through cigarette filters and pesticides.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cigarette butts, which are often dumped into oceans, lakes and other water sources, have toxic substances with implications for the quality of drinking water.</li> </ul>
<p><b>8.</b> Decent work &amp; economic growth</p> 	<p>Provide good working conditions for over 1 million workers</p> <p>Invest in programs to end child labor</p> <p>(See SDG 1 regarding economic growth)</p>	<p><b>"Downplay the negative impacts of tobacco farming in communities and shift attention away from it through inappropriate or weakly developed and misleading corporate social responsibility campaigns."</b><sup>5</sup></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low prices for leaves have kept farmers in a debt-poverty cycle that leads to the use of child labor.</li> <li>• According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), 70% of children involved in child labor (about 108 million children) are concentrated primarily in the agriculture sector.</li> <li>• Notably based on the ILO Secretariat report, decent work in tobacco farms has yet to improve despite decades of programs with the tobacco industry's so-called CSR on child labor.</li> </ul>
<p><b>9.</b> Industry, innovation &amp; infrastructure</p> 	<p>Use research and technology (in new "smoke-free" products) to help deliver on SDGs</p>	<p><b>Use research to produce new addictive products and market them more effectively in emerging media platforms.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most countries do not have the technology, expertise and regulations in place to manage this.</li> <li>• Tobacco marketing targets the youth in order to replace quitting or dying smokers because those not smoking by the age of 18 are unlikely to ever do so.</li> </ul>
<p><b>10.</b> Reduced inequalities</p> 	<p>"Develop our product portfolio and new business models to address pricing barriers"<sup>6</sup> (re: novel and emerging products)</p>	<p><b>Market novel products in a manner that normalizes smoking, and use pricing strategies to dominate all market segments, including offering cheaper cigarettes designed for the poor.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In most countries, tobacco sales are highest among the poor, those with low literacy rates and those with a mental health condition, which compounds inequitable conditions.</li> </ul>

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<p><b>11.</b> Sustainable cities &amp; communities</p> 	<p>Replace deadly cigarettes with “smoke-free products”</p>	<p><b>Mislead the public about the safety and emissions of novel products.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tobacco smoke lowers air quality, compromising the safety of housing, workplaces, transport systems and public spaces.</li> </ul>
<p><b>12.</b> Responsible consumption &amp; production</p> 	<p>Reduce the environmental impact of their products, including recycling and litter-prevention programs</p>	<p><b>Generate 1.69 billion pounds of toxic waste each year releasing thousands of chemicals into the air, water and soil.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Over 4.5 trillion cigarette butts are not disposed of properly, making them the most littered item on the planet.</li> </ul>
<p><b>13.</b> Climate action</p> 	<p>Mitigate risks of climate change through carbon neutral programs</p>	<p><b>Shirk responsibility for compensating for the environmental harm caused by its business, including a deforestation rate of 200,000 hectares a year.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tobacco companies routinely downplay their environmental harm.</li> </ul>
<p><b>14.</b> Life below water</p> 	<p>Reduce the environmental impact of products, including through litter prevention, and ensure effluents released are within government regulations</p>	<p><b>Find ways to continue their business practices that harm aquatic systems.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tobacco companies provide campaign donations that allow cigarette butts to go unregulated despite being the single most collected trash in beach clean-ups.</li> <li>• They also pollute waterways and threaten aquatic life through cigarette filters and pesticides.</li> </ul>
<p><b>15.</b> Life on land</p> 	<p>Protect biodiversity, particularly in affected forested areas</p>	<p><b>Conduct so-called environmental activities to detract attention from liability for environmental harm.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tobacco farming and cultivation causes the irreversible loss of trees and biodiversity.</li> <li>• Clearing land for tobacco growing and cigarette-related forest fires leads to deforestation.</li> </ul>

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<p><b>16.</b> Peace, justice &amp; strong institutions</p> 	<p>“Combat illicit trade in tobacco products,”<sup>7</sup> support the rule of law and transparency</p> <p>Be against the “illegitimate tobacco industry” that can “erode the rule of law and upset peaceful existence by financing the operations of criminal networks”<sup>8</sup></p>	<p><b>Lobby and bribe policymakers to favor commercial interests and weaken, delay or completely frustrate implementation of lifesaving measures through litigation against governments or outright circumvention of its provisions.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The major tobacco transnationals have been found to be complicit in illicit trade; a vast majority of illicitly trafficked cigarettes are “illicit whites” or legitimately produced products that find their way into illicit markets.</li> </ul>
<p><b>17.</b> Partnerships for the goals</p> 	<p>Be a partner in health, despite conflicts of interest, in order to promote alternative products</p> <p>Partner with governments to fight illicit trade</p>	<p><b>Influence policymakers to water down life-saving measures (including raising taxes and banning advertising, promotions and sponsorship) in favor of commercial interests in dangerous, addictive products, effectively undermining efforts to achieve the SDGs.</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The tobacco industry’s CSR activities related to SDGs are designed to enhance its public image and induce tax exemptions.</li> <li>Tobacco companies cause violation of treaty laws, which disapprove of partnerships with the tobacco industry in general, and especially on efforts to fight illicit trade.</li> </ul>

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## Endnotes

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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 strategies and tactics that undermine public health. STOP is funded by Bloomberg Philanthropies and comprised of a partnership between The Tobacco Control Research Group at the [University of Bath](#), [The Global Center for Good Governance in Tobacco Control \(GGTC\)](#), the International Union Against Tuberculosis and Lung Disease (The Union) and [Vital Strategies](#). For more information, visit [exposetobacco.org](http://exposetobacco.org).



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