



STOPPING TOBACCO
ORGANIZATIONS & PRODUCTS

COVID-19
Monitoring
Brief



Global



STOP COVID-19 Monitoring Brief: The tobacco industry, its interests and allies

Edition 2: Covering the period
April 17 – May 1, 2020

May 06, 2020,

This update from [STOP, a global tobacco industry watchdog](#), is not intended as a comprehensive list of all TI responses, but as a chance to share the trends and emerging patterns observed from multiple sources. We invite readers to [share information](#) or leads about additional examples or new trends. Next issue: May 20, 2020.

Major Trends in the Second Monitoring Period

- Continued Corporate Social Responsibility activities
- Brand and product marketing during COVID-19
- Industry response to pandemic tobacco regulation, bans and tobacco control efforts
- Manufacture during COVID-19 and risk to tobacco workers
- The science of COVID-19 risk and tobacco products

Undermining the WHO and public health: There has been particular criticism of the WHO's advice on vaping and the FCTC from pro-vaping groups and industry supporters in [Vietnam](#), [Malaysia](#) and [Australia](#). Although there is no evidence of industry links, they appear to be adopting industry tactics and arguments. Thanks to Cancer Council, Australia, and other colleagues for highlighting some of these WHO criticisms.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

CSR has continued as a key industry response, though at a reduced level as the industry shifts towards policy interference and influencing the scientific debate.

- **CSR has been successful in inciting governments to work with the industry**
 - In Nigeria, a regional governor has **requested pandemic donations from BAT**¹.
- **New CSR activity**
 - In the UK, **JTI donated money** to a hardship fund for independent retailers².
 - In Vietnam, **Vinatoba donated money and equipment** to the Vietnam Heart Institute at Bach Mai Hospital³.
 - SEATCA has produced an excellent [round up of COVID-19 related CSR activity in South East Asia](#).
- A new trend is emerging of **industry collaboration with NGOs** in order to bring items to people in lockdown, such as the Indian

Tobacco Company delivering their food brands to homes in India⁴.

• **Vaccine development**

- BAT's Kentucky BioProcessing **moves to animal testing of vaccine**⁵.

Additional Resources

GGTC regularly updates this thorough [list](#) of country specific tobacco industry donations during COVID-19 vs. the economic costs of tobacco.

Policy Interference, Manufacture and Tobacco Control

Industry resistance to tobacco regulations, bans and factory closures during the pandemic are an important continuing trend. Regulation enacted during the crisis may have lasting impacts on the industry post-pandemic. Tobacco control advocacy is especially important right now to prevent an increase in industry influence.

Manufacture and tobacco workers

- In Indonesia, two workers at the PMI Sampoerna factory have died of COVID-19. Manufacture has been suspended and other workers quarantined⁶. Indonesia was identified in PMI's Q1 report as an area where financial performance was down and that this disappointing performance was "Partly offset by premium Sampoerna A Mild" cigarettes produced at this factory⁷.
- In Zimbabwe, tobacco workers unions have called to postpone the tobacco marketing season to avoid putting workers at risk of infection⁸.

EU menthol ban

- The industry has requested an extension on the planned menthol ban⁹. In the UK a lack of extension has prompted complaints¹⁰.

Tobacco control

- Efforts to challenge the tobacco industry tactics during the pandemic have increased, particularly in low and middle-income countries. Examples include [Sri Lanka](#), [Iran](#), [Indonesia](#), [Kenya](#).
- An [open letter](#) was sent to the UN Secretary General signed by over 50 tobacco control groups highlighting

the importance of the WHO FCTC and the need to challenge tobacco industry CSR and lobbying in response to tobacco bans.

- In South Africa, BAT^{11*} and the Fairtrade Independent Tobacco Association (FITA) threatened legal action against the government¹² after it reversed its decision to lift the tobacco ban¹³ despite easing of lockdown. **At time of publication (May 6, 2020) BAT has declared they will no longer be pursuing legal action, saying "We have taken the decision not to pursue legal action at this stage but, instead, to pursue further discussions with government on the formulation and application of the regulations under the Covid-19 lockdown,¹⁴". It remains to be seen if FITA will do the same.*
- In the Philippines, tobacco manufacture has been halted. The Finance Secretary said he would not relax restrictions on tobacco and alcohol sales during lockdown, after it was suggested that the government was missing out on sin tax revenue due to reduced sales. The Secretary reaffirmed that the purpose of the tax was to reduce consumption and therefore lifting regulations would be counterproductive¹⁵. We are monitoring the situation for evidence of industry pressure.

Additional Resources

GGTC are maintaining a [full list of government bans \(and contemplated bans\) on tobacco and vaping products during the pandemic](#).

Academic Research of Industry Interest

Unusually high levels of media coverage has continued to focus on the perceived underrepresentation of reported smokers in hospitals with COVID-19^{16 17}, despite good evidence of increased COVID-19 severity in smokers^{18 19}. The non-peer reviewed, pre-publication platform 'Qeios' hosts much of this literature.

- **A COVID-19 "nicotinic hypothesis" has been published** on the non-peer reviewed platform, Qeios, by French scientists [Changeux, Miyara and Amoura](#)^{20 21}. First suggested by Konstantinos Farsalinos²², the hypothesis attempts to explain the apparent lack of active smokers with COVID-19 by suggesting a protective nicotine effect. Clinical trials to test this hypothesis are being

planned²³. Lead author of the “nicotinic hypothesis”, the neuroscientist [Pierre Changeux](#), Emeritus Professor of Neuroscience at the Institut Pasteur, received funding from the tobacco industry²⁴ until 2006/2007. While there is no suggestion that these historical links have influenced this current study, the lack of transparency regarding funding is noteworthy given the media attention the work has attracted.

- **This French research has become a global news story**^{25 26}, been promoted by industry supporters²⁷ and collaborators^{28 29}, and prompted calls for “more research” from the industry³⁰. Reporting of this literature has forced France to limit sales of nicotine products³¹.
- Public health groups, including [STOP](#), have **challenged this ‘nicotine hypothesis’**.

Additional Resources

See the [British Medical Journal blog](#) for the **latest updates on the science of COVID-19 and tobacco**.

Tobacco Product and Brand Marketing During COVID-19

The industry’s marketing response is subtle and requires more active monitoring. We hope to expand our focus in future editions and seek collaboration with other tobacco control groups to bring you this information.

- Vaping companies in the US have used PPE giveaways as a draw to their products³². While these aren’t tobacco industry-linked companies, this is an interesting marketing trend that we are keen to follow. If similar activities are spotted, please [get in contact](#).
- In future editions we will be expanding monitoring of social media marketing that uses hashtags such as #covid, #quarantine, #stayhome alongside tobacco industry products, particularly on Twitter and Instagram. If readers come across such marketing, please let us know.

Additional Resources

The Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids (CTFK) maintain [a list of COVID-19 related product and brand marketing activities](#) as part of their TakeAPart Campaign

Future Briefings

We welcome any contributions on issues mentioned in this update or anything related to COVID-19 and the Tobacco Industry. Contact us at bath@exposetobacco.org. The next update will be on May 20, 2020.

Visit the [Tobacco Tactics COVID-19](#) page for further information.

- ¹ <https://guardian.ng/opinion/coronavirus-and-tobacco-industry-duplicity/>
- ² <https://www.talkingretail.com/news/industry-news/nfrn-hardship-fund-hits-200000-mark-28-04-2020/>
- ³ <http://baochinhphu.vn/Doanh-nghiep/Vinataba-ung-ho-Benh-vien-Bach-Mai-phong-chong-dich-COVID19/391183.vgp>
- ⁴ <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/itc-s-boxes-of-hope-and-happiness-to-provide-essential-supplies-to-the-elderly-amid-covid-19-lockdown/story-AzWnq8E2qhokrqUSS72DK.html>
- ⁵ <https://edc.owensboro.com/kbp-begins-testing-covid-19-vaccine-candidate-on-animals/?oti=76>
- ⁶ <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/04/30/sampoerna-factory-closes-after-two-covid-19-deaths-authorities-race-to-trace-contacts.html>
- ⁷ <https://philipmorrisinternational.qcs-web.com/static-files/4f3ed693-a022-4770-9d6c-dbd2ea81d7d2>
- ⁸ <https://www.newzimbabwe.com/tobacco-workers-union-call-for-auction-floor-opening-delay-until-lockdown-ends/>
- ⁹ <https://tobaccoreporter.com/2020/04/21/eu-menthol-ban-industry-asks-for-more-time/>
- ¹⁰ <https://forecourtrader.co.uk/news/fullstory.php/aid/18490/Retailers reminded about approach of Menthol cigarette ban.html>
- ¹¹ <https://www.sabcnews.com/sabcnews/british-american-tobacco-threatens-legal-action-over-cigarette-ban/>
- ¹² <https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2020-04-30-tobacco-association-heads-to-court-to-challenge-ban-on-cigarette-sales/>
- ¹³ <https://m.fin24.com/Economy/South-Africa/lockdown-cigarettes-liquor-still-wont-be-for-sale-on-level-4-20200429>
- ¹⁴ <https://www.fin24.com/Economy/sas-largest-cigarette-company-drops-proposed-legal-action-against-tobacco-ban-20200506>
- ¹⁵ <https://www.manilastandard.net/business/economy-trade/322452/dominguez-unperturbed-over-decrease-in-sin-tax-collections.html>
- ¹⁶ <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8264635/More-proof-smokers-risk-catching-coronavirus-expert-admits-weird.html>
- ¹⁷ https://www.economist.com/science-and-technology/2020/05/02/smokers-seem-less-likely-than-non-smokers-to-fall-ill-with-covid-19?utm_campaign=coronavirus-special-edition&utm_medium=newsletter&utm_source=salesforce-marketing-cloud&utm_term=2020-05-02&utm_content=article-link-6&fbclid=IwAR1Scow7pFXpwneomBrCOWPvtudSKTuxPPN_BrjPFOFQeV7-BsdzN9G5APk
- ¹⁸ https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMoa2007621#.Xq0QFV_93aY
- ¹⁹ <https://www.qeios.com/read/UJR2AW.2>
- ²⁰ <https://www.qeios.com/read/WPP19W.3>
- ²¹ <https://www.qeios.com/read/FXGQSB.2>
- ²² <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7192087/>
- ²³ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/22/french-study-suggests-smokers-at-lower-risk-of-getting-coronavirus>
- ²⁴ http://web.archive.org/web/20200425083910/https://www.lemonde.fr/sciences/article/2012/05/31/querre-du-tabac-la-bataille-de-la-nicotine_1710837_1650684.html
- ²⁵ <https://m.thanhnien.vn/the-gioi/nicotine-co-the-lam-giam-nguy-co-nhiem-covid-19-1214722.amp?fbclid=IwAR1EURc88rMSavOqe06cFWOjf6DTyq38WwVoMetdlwTR518etrX5TiLymEq>
- ²⁶ <https://www.theweek.in/news/health/2020/04/25/france-limits-nicotine-sales-as-researchers-test-if-it-protects-against-covid-19.html>
- ²⁷ <https://www.spiked-online.com/2020/04/23/smoke-fags-save-lives/>
- ²⁸ https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/epgyje/why-are-smokers-being-hospitalized-less-often-from-coronavirus
- ²⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/mar/17/vice-media-attacked-for-making-tobacco-adverts-for-philip-morris>
- ³⁰ <https://www.smokefreeworld.org/covid-19-smoking-and-vaping-more-research-needed/#COVID19>
- ³¹ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/coronavirus-france-nicotine-patch-gum-research-covid-19-a9484696.html>
- ³² <https://www.latimes.com/science/story/2020-04-17/coronavirus-tobacco-vaping-industries-opportunities>