




STOPPING TOBACCO
ORGANIZATIONS & PRODUCTS

COVID-19
Monitoring Brief 

Global



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

Edition 4: Covering the period
May 15 – May 29, 2020

June 04, 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: June 18, 2020.

Major Trends in the Fourth Monitoring Period

- Developments in South Africa as more industry stakeholders weigh in on tobacco ban.
- Legal action in response to pandemic-related tobacco regulation and risks.
- Latest lobbying and policy interference to prevent tobacco bans.
- PMI links to COVID-19, smoking and nicotine research.
- Brand marketing: Insights from the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) and Ethos, Mexico.

The WHO have released their [Scientific Review of Smoking and COVID-19](#). They exclude non peer-reviewed studies from the analysis. It concludes that smoking is associated with COVID-19 increased severity and death and that there is “no evidence to quantify the risk to smokers of hospitalization with COVID-19 or of infection by SARS-CoV-2”.

Non peer-reviewed preprint publication has become a contentious issue. An article in the Lancet analysing their use during the pandemic found that a “lack of peer review can also translate into issues of credibility and misinformation”.¹

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

- PMI Sampoerna in Indonesia, where factory workers died from COVID-19,² have been donating to local pandemic relief via an NGO: The Social Transformation and Public Awareness Foundation (STAPA) Center.³
- In Kentucky, Altria (aka Philip Morris USA) have donated \$35,000 to community support group United Way, stating that “The funds are part of a \$1 million commitment by Altria to address emergent

needs in its headquarters community of Richmond, Virginia, and its other manufacturing and grower communities.”⁴

- **BAT Vaccine development:** BAT General Manager, Felicio Ferraz, says Kentucky BioProcessing have submitted a Pre-Investigative New Drug package to the US FDA and highlights BAT’s CSR donations in the UK, Brazil, Kenya, Bangladesh and USA.⁵

Additional Resources

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

Tobacco Workers and Manufacture During Pandemic

STOP, ASH US and GGTC have all spoken out on the [risk to tobacco workers](#) during the pandemic, as reported in [this article](#) that summarises cases of worker COVID-19 exposure in Pakistan and internationally.

- **Indonesian Workers:** 51 workers in South Korean tobacco company KT&G’s Indonesian factory tested positive for COVID-19.⁶

Policy Interference and Legal Action

[South Africa](#) tobacco ban:

The government announced a continuation of the ban as they move in to ‘level 3 lockdown’, with the Minister of Co-operative Governance & Traditional Affairs, Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, defending the decision in her response to the Fair-Trade Independent Tobacco Association’s (FITA) application to suspend the ban.⁷

- The FITA have said its legal challenge will be heard on the 9th and 10th June. BAT have announced they will be going to court to challenge the extension of the ban and are supported by JTI.⁸
- The Vapour Products Association of South Africa (VPSA) has also criticised the continued ban.⁹

Suggestions of possible litigation from and against the industry in relation to COVID-19:

- **Potential litigation against government regulations:** A corporate accountability campaign group, Corporate Europe Observatory, has warned that law firms are predicting legal challenges to pandemic-related government regulation and many firms are using email alerts and webinars to encourage foreign investors to sue governments for losses through the investor-state dispute settlement (ISDS) system. This could include losses related to tobacco industry regulations.¹⁰
- **Vaping producers on alert for COVID-related consumer litigation:** The National Law Review, in the United States, has advised producers and companies to “stay advised and prepared” for a possible wave of litigation from consumers concerned about the health impacts of vaping during COVID-19, saying that a lack of evidence for the risks does not prevent successful litigation if public opinion is strong.¹¹

Lobbying:

- The tobacco control group, PROGGA in Bangladesh has [reported](#) tobacco companies successfully lobbying the Ministry of Industries to reject a suggested tobacco ban proposed by the Health and Family Welfare Ministry. The Ministry of Industries had initially agreed to the Health and Family Welfare Ministry request that companies suspend tobacco production during the pandemic.¹²
- In St. Petersburg, Russia, PMI, BAT and JTI have resumed production after lobbying Prime Minister, Mikhail Mishustin, to include tobacco on the list of essential items during lockdown.¹³
- In the United Arab Emirates, the Federal Tax Authority has delayed bans on water pipe, tobacco and e-cigarettes without digital tax stamps to 2021 in response to stakeholder pressure citing COVID-19.¹⁴

Additional Resources

GGTC’s list of bans and contemplated bans per country: [Bans/ Contemplated Bans on Tobacco/ Vaping Products](#)

Tobacco Tactics has a resource page on [Industry lobbying](#)

Academic Research of Industry Interest

- The UCL [Living review of COVID-19 smoking data](#) continues to show uncertainty about the risk of COVID-19 infection in smokers, but does show evidence of increased disease severity in current smokers with COVID-19.
- [Changeux and Miyara's](#) COVID-19 nicotine hypothesis¹⁵ has resulted in further clinical trials of nicotine products as COVID-19 treatment. These include a nicotine patch trial in Wales examining the role of tobacco withdrawal¹⁶ and research project in to Swedish smokeless tobacco product Snus at Stockholm County's Centre for Epidemiology and Community Medicine.¹⁷
- PMI's [Foundation for a Smoke Free World](#) (FSFW) last month announced that they are "keenly interested in opportunities to collaborate on research to address relevant knowledge gaps. For example: **Are snus users in Sweden more or less likely to suffer from COVID-19 complications?**"¹⁸
- **On 1 June, the Foundation for Smoke Free World (FSFW) put out a [call for research proposals](#) "at the nexus of COVID-19, smoking, and nicotine".**

Tobacco industry COVID-19 research links:

- The FSFW published its annual [tax return](#) on 15 May 2020, revealing the recipients of Foundation grants during the 2018-2019 financial year. One of these grantees was the [NOSMOKE institute](#) at Patras Science Park, Greece. The sole senior staff member of this institute is Konstantinos Poulas, who has published an influential paper on COVID-19 and nicotine treatments where he declares no conflict of interest in the COI section.¹⁹ NOSMOKE institute received a total of [\\$105,985 from the FSFW](#) and NOSMOKE is developing its own nicotine products.²⁰
- [Riccardo Polosa](#) has also published similar findings highlighting the "therapeutic implications" of nicotine.²¹ On this paper Polosa declares his industry funding via the [Centre for Excellence for the Acceleration of Harm Reduction](#) (CoEHAR) and FSFW.

Additional Resources

ASH Scotland [resource page](#) for Covid-19 and smoking research

Tobacco Product and Brand Marketing During COVID-19

- The Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project published its [Pandering to a Pandemic report](#) which details PMI's attempts to use the pandemic as a marketing opportunity for products like IQOS, employing social media promotion and CSR.
- Ethos, a Mexican think tank, published [this report](#) on tobacco company marketing during COVID-19, including illegal 80% discounts on products and the industries involvement in the science of COVID-19 and smoking.

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 June 18, 2020.

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

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- [PROGGA](#), who provided the report on tobacco industry lobbying to the Ministry of Industries in Bangladesh
- [The Union's](#) country teams in Indonesia and Latin America who provided information on PMI Sampoerna CSR and Ethos reporting

Correction

In the previous edition we wrote that: "The University of Cape Town published a study which found that 39% of respondents had successfully quit smoking during lockdown..."

This was incorrect. The study finds that 41% of smokers had attempted to quit and **of that** 41%, 39% were successful. This equates to 16% of respondents successfully quitting.

- 1 [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/langlo/article/PIIS2214-109X\(20\)30113-3/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/langlo/article/PIIS2214-109X(20)30113-3/fulltext)
- 2 <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/04/30/sampoerna-factory-closes-after-two-covid-19-deaths-authorities-race-to-trace-contacts.html>
- 3 <https://kumparan.com/kabarpasasuruan/yayasan-stapa-center-dan-sampoerna-untuk-indonesia-beri-bantuan-tangani-covid-19-1tDuco17SnT/full>
- 4 https://www.kentuckynewera.com/web/news/article_820e9919-ef9-52dd-9237-ee7a85234335.html
- 5 <http://georgiatoday.ge/news/21205/BAT-Makes-Progress-on-COVID-19-Vaccine-%26-Provides-Community-Support>
- 6 <https://koranmemo.com/51-karyawan-pt-kt-g-di-pasuruan-reaktif-rapid-test/>
- 7 <https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2020-05-27-this-is-why-we-banned-cigarette-sales-nkosazana-dlamini-zuma-tells-court/>
- 8 <https://www.iol.co.za/capeargus/news/batsa-to-challenge-lockdown-tobacco-sales-ban-in-court-48662907>
- 9 <https://www.itweb.co.za/content/o1Jr5Mx9ewyqKdWL>
- 10 <https://corporateeurope.org/en/2020/05/cashing-pandemic-how-lawyers-are-preparing-sue-states-over-covid-19-response-measures>
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- 12 <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2020/05/20/tobacco-ban-industries-ministry-quashes-health-division-s-proposal>
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- 14 <https://www.khaleejtimes.com/coronavirus-pandemic/coronavirus-uae-postpones-new-tax-rule-to-january-2021>
- 15 <https://www.qeios.com/read/FXGQSB>
- 16 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/17/plan-study-nicotine-patches-potential-coronavirus-treatment-covid-19>
- 17 <https://snusforumet.se/snus-and-covid-19-sweden-launches-new-research-project/>
- 18 <https://www.smokefreeworld.org/covid-19-smoking-and-vaping-more-research-needed/>
- 19 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7192087/>
- 20 <https://nosmoke.team/en/agromist/>
- 21 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7236870/>