

Bloomberg targets Big Tobacco's 'underhanded tactics'

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Billionaire former New York mayor Michael Bloomberg on Tuesday gave a trio of anti-tobacco crusaders \$20 million to up their game against an industry aggressively marketing its deadly wares worldwide, especially in developing countries.

The non-profit groups—based in France, England and Thailand—jointly secured the three-year grant to spotlight industry-led sabotage of policies designed to reduce [tobacco](#) use, Bloomberg told AFP.

"I'm sympathetic," he said by phone. "They want to promote their products and make money for their stockholders."

"But it is killing people, and I have always thought there is a point at which there are things more valuable—more important—than just increasing the bottom line."

The new initiative "will protect consumers by shining a light on the [tobacco industry](#)'s underhanded tactics, including marketing directly to children," Bloomberg added.

The Tobacco Control Research Group at the University of Bath in Britain, staffed by academics and journalists, has long tracked tobacco industry efforts to influence public policy, publishing its findings since 2011 on [tobaccotactics.org](#).

Big Tobacco's tactics to expand markets have included suing

governments seeking to implement plain packaging for cigarettes, sponsoring cultural events or sports teams, and challenging the legality of smoke-free zones.

In Thailand, The Global Centre for Good Governance in Tobacco Control (GGTC) focuses on Southeast Asia, and produces the Tobacco Industry Interference Index.

Finally, the Paris-based International Union Against Tuberculosis and Lung Disease—a scientific organisation—publishes the Tobacco Atlas, a national and global statistical database, and works with governments in 50 countries.

"Together, they can help save a lot of lives," said Bloomberg, who has given away upwards of a billion dollars over the last decade for the cause.

Tobacco claims nearly seven million lives each year from cancer and other lung diseases, a million in China alone, according to the World Health Organization (WHO).

Smoking has plateaued in most rich nations, but in the developing world the total number of tobacco users—overwhelmingly men, especially the young —keeps climbing.

A 'smoke-free world'?

The industry sold 5.5 trillion cigarettes last year to more than a billion smokers, generating \$700 billion (570 billion euros) in sales.

British American Tobacco, the largest publicly-traded tobacco company, raked in 5.2 billion pounds (5.8 billion euros, \$7.2 billion) in profits in 2016.

"This is the only product I know of where if you use it as advertised, it will kill you," said Bloomberg.

The Stopping Tobacco Organizations and Products (STOP) initiative was announced in March at the World Conference on tobacco or Health in Cape Town, South Africa.

"The tobacco industry is a major obstacle in the global drive to stop people dying early from cancer and heart disease," WHO Secretary-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said of the plan.

"STOP will be a key partner in the effort to uncover and overcome these barriers to [tobacco control](#)."

In September 2017, tobacco giant Philip Morris set up the Foundation for a Smoke-Free World with a 12-year endowment of \$80 million.

The move has been dismissed by public health advocates as a public relations ploy, and a way to position the company in the booming smokeless tobacco market.

E-cigarettes, however, remain controversial given their claim to be less harmful than traditional cigarettes.

A study published Thursday in the medical journal *Thorax*, for example, reports that so-called vaping can damage vital immune system cells in the lungs.

"Many e-cigarette companies have been bought up by the tobacco giants and there's certainly an agenda to portray e-cigarettes as safe," said lead author David Thickett from the University of Birmingham in England.

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