

Report names and shames countries cosy with Big Tobacco

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Dunhill Early Morning Pipe Tobacco, 1990's Murray. Credit: Sjschen/Wikipedia

The global tobacco industry has aggressively lobbied governments during the COVID-19 pandemic to expand markets and blunt measures designed to curb their business, a report from watchdog groups aligned with the World Health Organization claimed on Tuesday.

A ranking of 57 countries based on their willingness to keep Big Tobacco at bay puts Japan and Indonesia at the bottom of the list, with Romania, China and Lebanon among the 10 worst offenders.

The United States is the lowest-ranked Western nation, with Malaysia, Spain, Germany and India also seen as too accommodating, said the report by non-profit groups based in France, England and Thailand.

"The [tobacco industry](#) has a well-documented history of deception and of capitalising on humanitarian crises, and it is using the pandemic to attempt to improve its deteriorating public image," commented Adriana Blanco Marquizo, head of the secretariat for the World Health Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control.

Tobacco claims some eight million lives each year from cancer and other lung diseases, a million in China alone.

In several countries, stringent [tobacco control](#) measures were defeated or diluted.

Philip Morris International (PMI), for example, "lobbied for the promotion and sale of its heated [tobacco](#) product in a dozen countries", resulting in the lifting of bans, lower taxes, and a voice in government-led deliberations on regulating tobacco products, the report found.

Taxes on these new nicotine delivery devices are now lower than cigarettes in France, Germany and Japan.

Costa Rica, Zambia and Bangladesh also eased the tax burden for tobacco firms.

Big Tobacco has a long track record of suing to block plain packaging for cigarettes, sponsoring cultural events or sports teams, and challenging

the legality of smoke-free zones.

\$850 billion industry

During the pandemic, tobacco firms have been handing out [personal protective equipment](#), ventilators and hand sanitisers in countries across the world.

"While publicising its charitable acts to resuscitate its image as being part of the solution, the industry was simultaneously lobbying governments not to impose restrictions on its business," the report said.

In Kenya, the government listed tobacco products as "essential products" during the pandemic, and in Jordan cigarettes were delivered with bread and other foods directly to neighbourhoods.

By contrast, India and South Africa banned the sale of [tobacco products](#) during the pandemic.

More broadly, the countries seen as least susceptible to the influence of tobacco interests included France, Uganda, Britain, New Zealand and Iran.

Peru, The Netherlands, Kenya and Ethiopia also got good marks.

The report, releasee by the STOP partnership, was put together after former New York mayor Michael Bloomberg gave the researchers a three-year grant of \$20 million to track how the industry markets its wares worldwide, especially in developing countries.

"This is the only product I know of where if you use it as advertised, it will kill you," Bloomberg told AFP in 2018, when he awarded the grant.

More than 80 percent of the world's 1.3 billion tobacco users live in low- and [middle-income countries](#).

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

The global tobacco market size was valued at nearly \$850 billion in 2019.

The groups collaborating on the report included the Tobacco Research Group at the University of Bath, the Global Center for Good Governance in Tobacco Control and the International Union Against Tuberculosis and Lung Disease.

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