

The changed face of the tobacco industry

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Galvanizing global action towards a tobacco-free world

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Excellencies, honourable ministers, distinguished delegates, members of civil society, ladies and gentlemen,

I am pleased to speak at the opening of this 15th World Conference on Tobacco or Health. I thank Singapore's Health Promotion Board for organizing this event, and am pleased that WHO has provided technical support.

This conference is being held at a time when we are at a crossroads in our efforts to rid the world of a killing addiction. In principle, the balance is entirely in our favour. In a perfectly sane, reasonable, and rational world, with a level playing field, the anti-tobacco community would surely speak with the loudest voice and carry the biggest stick.

Evidence for the physical harm, and economic costs, of tobacco use keeps growing, and I am certain that this conference will expand the evidence base even further.

Tobacco use is the world's number one preventable killer. We know this statistically, beyond a shadow of a doubt. In a world undergoing economic upheaval, with populations ageing, chronic diseases on the rise, and medical costs soaring, tackling a huge and entirely preventable cause of disease and death becomes all the more imperative.

We know that tobacco directly harms the user's health in multiple ways. We know that tobacco products kill their consumers.

We know that tobacco smoking, like a drive-by shooting, kills innocent bystanders who are forced to breathe air contaminated with hundreds of toxic chemicals. We know what tobacco exposure during pregnancy does to the fetus, another innocent, blameless, and entirely helpless victim.

We know that tobacco use is not a choice. It is a powerful addiction. The true choice is between tobacco or health.

We have evidence, and we have instruments. As a tool for fighting back, we have the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, with 174 parties now committed to implementing the treaty's articles and obligations. These parties govern nearly 90% of the world's 7 billion people. If safety from tobacco lies in numbers, we have them.

But we also know that implementation falls short, for many reasons, in many countries. We have addressed this problem as well. We have a practical, cost-effective way to scale up implementation of provisions in the treaty on the ground. That is, the best-buy and good-buy measures for reducing tobacco use set out in the MPOWER package.

We have abundant country experiences that demonstrate the effectiveness of these measures. Evidence also shows how these measures can have a value-added impact.

For example, in a study published earlier this year, researchers demonstrated that smoke-free workplaces actually decrease smoking in homes. These findings soundly refute industry-sponsored propaganda.

Just two weeks ago, another major study, involving more than 700,000 deliveries, found that smoking bans have significant health benefits for unborn babies. This proved true for women who smoke but also for women who have never consumed tobacco yet were exposed to second-hand smoke.

And we have an enemy, a ruthless and devious enemy, to unite us and ignite a passionate commitment to prevail.

Unfortunately, this is where the balance no longer tips so strongly in our favour. The enemy, the tobacco industry, has changed its face and its tactics. The wolf is no longer in sheep's clothing, and its teeth are bared.

Tactics aimed at undermining anti-tobacco campaigns, and subverting the Framework Convention, are no longer covert or cloaked by an image of corporate social responsibility. They are out in the open and they are extremely aggressive.

The high-profile legal actions targeting Uruguay, Norway, Australia, and Turkey are deliberately designed to instil fear in countries wishing to introduce similarly tough tobacco control measures.

What the industry wants to see is a domino effect. When one country's resolve falters under the pressure of costly, drawn-out litigation and threats of billion-dollar settlements, others with similar intentions are likely to topple as well.

Numerous other countries are being subjected to the same kind of aggressive scare tactics. It is hard for any country to bear the financial burden of this kind of litigation, but most especially so for small countries like Uruguay. This is not a sane, or reasonable, or rational situation in any sense. This is not a level playing field.

Big Tobacco can afford to hire the best lawyers and PR firms that money can buy. Big Money can speak louder than any moral, ethical, or public health argument, and can trample even the most damning scientific evidence. We have seen this happen before.

It is horrific to think that an industry known for its dirty tricks and dirty laundry could be allowed to trump what is clearly in the public's best interest.

And there are other tactics, some new, others just old butts in new ashtrays.

In some countries, the tobacco industry is pushing for joint government-industry committees to vet or screen all policy and legislative matters pertaining to tobacco control. Don't fall into this trap. Doing so is just like appointing a committee of foxes to look after your chickens.

More and more, investigations are uncovering the tobacco industry's hand in court cases filed against tobacco control measures.

Paying people to use a country's judicial system to challenge the legality of measures that protect the public is a flagrant abuse of the judicial system and a flagrant affront to national sovereignty. This is direct interference with a country's internal affairs.

Members of civil society,

We need you, now more than ever.

Experience has shown that, when government political resolve falters or weakens under industry pressure, coalitions of civil society can take up the slack and carry the day. We need this kind of outcry, this kind of rage.

Shaping public opinion is vital. If tough tobacco legislation wins votes, politicians will back it, and fight back against industry.

Last year's high-level UN meeting on noncommunicable diseases adopted a political declaration. To reduce risk factors and create health-promoting environments, heads of state and government agreed on the need to accelerate implementation of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control.

They recognized that substantially reducing tobacco consumption contributes to reducing NCDs and has considerable health benefits for individuals and countries. They also recognized the fundamental conflict of interest that exists between the tobacco industry and public health.

When I addressed that meeting, I reminded participants that full implementation of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control would deliver the single biggest preventive blow to heart disease, cancer, diabetes, and respiratory disease. I called on heads of state and government to stand rock-hard against the despicable efforts of the tobacco industry to subvert this treaty.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I have a final comment.

I come from a culture that shows great respect for its elders. So let me say that some of the older people in this audience may recall the Virginia Slims marketing campaign that targeted young professional women.

That campaign sought to hook teenaged girls and young women by portraying smoking as a symbol of emancipation and self-assertive freedom. Its slogan was memorable: "You've come a long way, baby."

Let me turn that around, addressing my own personal marketing campaign to the tobacco industry.

“We’ve come a long way, bullies. We will not be fazed by your harassment. Your products kill nearly 6 million people each year. You run a killing and intimidating industry, but not in a crush-proof box. Tobacco industry: the number and fortitude of your public health enemies will damage your health.”

Ladies and gentlemen,

I sincerely hope that this conference, including the high-level ministerial panel on countering tobacco industry interference, will again tip the balance entirely in our favour.

This conference is our watershed event. I sincerely hope that this event further damages the health of an industry that aggressively sells a health-destroying addiction.

We can, and must, stop this industry’s massive contribution to sickness and death, dead in its tracks.

I wish you a most productive meeting. Thank you.