

Global cooperation to raise youth awareness of tobacco industry interference tactics: a project from WHO FCTC Knowledge Hubs

INTRODUCTION

One of the main obstacles to the implementation of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) is the interference of the tobacco industry (TI), which undermines the development and enforcement of effective tobacco control policies worldwide¹. This interference allows the TI to target new consumers, especially young people, fostering lifelong addiction. In this context, international cooperation and concerted global efforts are crucial to counter TI strategies and protect public health.

RESPONSE

In 2024, the WHO FCTC Knowledge hub for Article 5.3 and the WHO FCTC Knowledge hub for Public Awareness gathered a group of six representatives of youth non-governmental organizations (NGO) from around the world to exchange perspectives on protecting young people from TI’s harmful tactics. On the basis of this collaboration, a communication strategy to inform and empower youth against these practices was co-developed, with the French NGO Tobacco Free Generation (developed by the *Comité National Contre le Tabagisme*), by producing communication material.

STRATEGY

The communication campaign aims to make **decision-makers** and **young people** (18 to 30 years old) worldwide aware of the consequences of the TI’s actions for their future. It seeks to promote a global change in perception about them, which will help to engage individuals and collective groups, influence decision-makers and encourage the introduction of more restrictive legislation, or an improved enforcement of existing laws.

OBJECTIVES

Public Health objective:

- Decrease the negative impact of tobacco and new nicotine-based products on global health by encouraging young people to quit smoking and limiting their initiation.

Specific objectives:

- Change attitudes** of young people towards tobacco and new nicotine-based products.
- Encourage the introduction of more restrictive legislations, or to improve the enforcement of laws**, to protect young people from the tobacco industry lobby in the world.

Communication objectives:

- Raise awareness** among young people about damage caused by tobacco and new nicotine-based products to health and environment.
- Inform** about marketing strategies of the TI targeting young people.

TI TACTICS AND THEIR IMPACT HIGHLIGHTED BY THE COMMUNICATION CAMPAIGN

Tactics	Impacts
Adding filters to cigarettes to make them look less harmful	Make smokers believe that the cigarettes they smoke are less harmful
Diversifying products and creating packaging for young people (with vaping products): misleading colorful nicotine products with appealing flavors	Attract young people and get them addicted to nicotine at an early age
Implementing sales tactics aimed at young people (setting up sales points near schools)	Replace their consumers, because their products are killing the current consumers
Targeting potential customers, vulnerable populations or those in search of an identity (LGBTQ+, teenagers, minorities, young women)	Make vulnerable populations even more vulnerable by making them addicted to nicotine
Using Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR).	Hide the impact of their industry on the environment and workers (including children)
Pseudo-“Harm reduction” arguments to sell new nicotine products.	Attract young people (by reducing the perception of products toxicity) and make them addicted to nicotine at an early age

COMMUNICATION MATERIALS

- Advocacy campaign toward decision makers:** a policy paper will highlight, with global arguments, the impact of tobacco industry and its strategies worldwide.
- Digital communication campaign toward youth:** various assets for social media will show the TI’s marketing strategies and their impacts.

PRETEST

A qualitative pretest (focus groups) will be conducted in 5 geographical areas to assess the appealing and understanding of the produced digital assets and the engagement of young people.

DISSEMINATION AND EVALUATION

The materials will be disseminated internationally by our global network.

The evaluation of the digital communication campaign toward young people will rely on social network data (views, impressions, engagements) and an analysis of qualitative testimonies. The advocacy campaign toward decision-makers will be evaluated through a report on the use of the policy paper: (email distribution) number of contacts and opening rate, (direct distribution) number of impressions and qualitative report on citations of the document by decision-makers.

REFERENCES

1. World Health Organization. Global Progress Report on Implementation of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control. World Health Organization, 2023.

CONCLUSION

This project fosters intersectoral and international collaboration between different types of actors (public health agencies, universities and NGOs) from all regions of the world to counter the global influence of TI. It could also empower young people to recognize and stand up against the harmful effects of TI’s activities. Aligned with the principles of FCTC, it illustrates a collective action that seeks to produce greater impact and protect everyone’s right to the highest standard of health.