



**FCTC**

WHO FRAMEWORK CONVENTION  
ON TOBACCO CONTROL

SECRETARIAT • KNOWLEDGE HUB



WHO FCTC  
KNOWLEDGE HUB  
FOR ARTICLE 5.3

School of Global Studies, Thammasat University  
Mahidol University, Thailand

# Voices of Local Advocates: Defending Article 5.3 in Action

*November 2025*



**AKINBODE OLUWAFEMI**

**Executive Director,  
Corporate Accountability and Public  
Participation Africa (CAPPA)**

# SUMMARY

Akinbode Oluwafemi, a veteran Nigerian tobacco control advocate, recounts decades of facing intimidation, bribery attempts, and threats from the tobacco industry, particularly British American Tobacco (BAT) and Philip Morris International. His earliest encounter occurred at the 2000 World Health Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC) Public Hearing in Geneva, where BAT officials tried to recruit him with offers of sponsorship. Subsequent incidents included harassment, threats of lawsuits, and even a death threat following a live television interview. Despite a violent attack on his home in 2010, he remained steadfast, rejecting relocation offers and continuing his advocacy.

Oluwafemi attributes his resilience to prior experiences in pro-democracy and environmental campaigns against oil giants like Shell and Chevron. He believes the tobacco industry's exploitation mirrors that of extractive industries and sees his mission as protecting public health and sovereignty.

He identifies new forms of tobacco industry interference as the greatest threat today, especially deceptive "harm reduction" narratives, co-opted public discourse through media, and social media manipulation. These tactics aim to undermine the gains of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC). Nigeria's response has been to institutionalize industry monitoring, collaborate closely with government agencies, and engage the media to expose industry deceit.

Oluwafemi warns that digital marketing and influencer culture, notably through Afrobeat music and movies, are recruiting young smokers. He urges advocates to publicly challenge celebrities who promote tobacco use and to empower youth to lead digital resistance campaigns that redefine social norms around smoking.

For advocates' protection, he calls for long-term institutional support, sustained funding, global solidarity mechanisms, and capacity building to counter industry evolution. He envisions a continental "Africa Week of Resistance" and a unified regional platform for documenting and countering interference.

Despite progress, enforcement of FCTC Article 5.3 remains weak; most African countries lack enforceable legal instruments or deterrent penalties for violations. Nigeria's model, anchored in cross-sector collaboration, independence, resilience, and evidence-based advocacy, offers lessons but also highlights the years of persistence required for reform.

Looking ahead, Oluwafemi envisions a decade where African nations fully domesticate Article 5.3, enforce sanctions for violations, and hold tobacco companies legally accountable for public health damages, cementing a future free from tobacco industry influence.



**Q** Could you share a powerful example of intimidation or bribery attempts you have faced from the tobacco industry?

**A** Over several decades of involvement in tobacco control advocacy, I have experienced numerous incidents of attempted bribery and intimidation by representatives of the tobacco industry. Initially, these encounters took the form of subtle inducements. However, when it became clear that I would not yield to such tactics, the approaches escalated into overt acts of intimidation.

My first direct encounter with the tobacco industry occurred during the World Health Organization Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHO FCTC) Public Hearing held in Geneva in October 2000. As I was walking toward the entrance of the CIGC Conference Centre, I suddenly heard someone call my name from behind. It was unexpected, as I had not anticipated that anyone in that setting would know me personally. When I turned, the individual introduced himself as Mr. Kehinde Johnson, then the Director of Regulatory Affairs for British American Tobacco (BAT) Nigeria. His presence was surprising; I was likely the only Nigerian representative from a non-governmental organization (NGO) at the hearing and one of the very few African participants.

I was already familiar with Mr. Johnson's name, as he had frequently appeared in Nigerian media defending BAT's activities, often issuing public statements that countered my own interviews. It was, therefore, disconcerting to realize that a senior industry representative had tracked me to Geneva. The following day, Mr. Johnson returned, accompanied by another BAT official—this time a Ugandan national based at BAT's London headquarters. They invited me to join them for lunch, appealing to our shared African identity as a gesture of goodwill. I accepted, on the condition that I would pay for my own meal, and we met at the public cafeteria inside the conference centre.

During the conversation, the Ugandan official expressed admiration for my work as a young African activist and proposed that BAT could “support” my organization by funding participation in international conferences and other initiatives. I responded firmly that they had misjudged me, explaining that I had previously confronted multinational corporations in the oil sector—entities far larger than any tobacco company—and that no form of inducement could compromise my principles. That exchange was our last communication.

In Nigeria, similar incidents persisted. A BAT staff member, described as a Legislative Liaison Officer, repeatedly invited me to visit the company's offices to “observe how responsible they were,” invitations which I consistently declined. I also recall a staged encounter with representatives of Philip Morris at a restaurant, orchestrated by an acquaintance whom I had respected. The conversation quickly revealed itself as another attempt at persuasion, framed as a casual discussion about lifestyle choices and leisure activities. I ended the exchange by stating unequivocally that the only meaningful action they could take was to comply with the law and cease marketing harmful products.

The acts of intimidation that followed were more severe. They ranged from the abrupt termination of a live television interview to legal threats from BAT lawyers following the publication of our report titled *Death and Destruction*. On one occasion, BAT's legal representatives requested my removal from a congressional hearing, claiming they could not remain in the same room with a non-member of parliament. Among all such experiences, one particular incident remains deeply memorable.

During a live appearance on Kakaaki, a highly popular morning program on Africa Independent Television (AIT), I had, as usual, turned off my mobile phone during the broadcast. After the interview, when I switched it back on, the first call I received was from a family friend—a former police officer - who sounded alarmed and urged me to stop driving immediately. Moments later, my wife called with the same plea, asking me to pull over and remain stationary. I later learned that someone had contacted my family friend, threatening that they intended to “eliminate” me before I could leave the vicinity of the studio. Fortunately, by the time I received these warnings, I had already driven far from the location.

Following this episode, I began taking extra precautions, such as changing clothes immediately after live television appearances to avoid recognition. At that time, Nigeria did not have a system for registering mobile phone numbers, which made tracing the source of such threats virtually impossible. These experiences illustrate the extent to which the tobacco industry will go to suppress dissent and protect its commercial interests. They also highlight the personal risks faced by individuals and organizations advocating for stronger tobacco control policies in the face of powerful transnational corporations.



**Q** How did you overcome these challenges, and what were the end results?

**A** My early involvement in pro-democracy and press-freedom movements under military rule, followed by environmental advocacy against multinational corporations such as Shell and Chevron, shaped my capacity to confront the aggressive tactics of the tobacco industry. These experiences fostered resilience and a clear understanding of how entrenched corporate and political interests respond when challenged.

I viewed engagement with the tobacco industry as a moral imperative, given its parallels with the exploitative and harmful practices of the oil sector and the state’s inadequate protection of public health. Rejecting all forms of inducement or compromise, I remained firm despite intimidation. In 2010, my commitment was severely tested when my home was attacked, resulting in the deaths of my brother-in-law and a security guard. Although offered relocation to the United States for safety, I declined and resumed my advocacy soon after. This struggle has been long and difficult, but my resolve remains unwavering. Over time, the industry has come to recognize that I cannot be influenced or silenced.

**Q** Which industry interference tactics pose the greatest threat to tobacco control in Africa today, and why?

**A** The tobacco industry, while remaining as aggressive as ever in pursuing its commercial interests, has notably evolved its tactics. Its strategies have become more sophisticated and subtle, often framed within deceptive public health narratives. The industry has deliberately constructed misleading terminologies and rhetorical frameworks under the guise of “harm reduction,” seeking to rebrand its image and regain legitimacy within public health discourse.

These strategies manifest through the manipulation of media and social media platforms, where the industry amplifies distorted messages and undermines evidence-based tobacco control measures. Moreover, both direct and indirect—or proxy—attacks have been waged against the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) and corresponding national legislation. Collectively, these coordinated efforts aim to erode the significant progress achieved under the FCTC and to weaken global tobacco control governance.

**Q** How did the tobacco control community counter these TI tactics, and what were the lessons learned?

**A** In Nigeria, industry monitoring and response were systematically integrated into all tobacco control initiatives. We established strong collaboration with government agencies to strengthen resistance to industry interference, while the media played a vital role through continuous public exposure of industry misconduct. Equally important was the use of scientific evidence to counter false industry narratives.

The key lesson is that the tobacco control community can successfully challenge and overcome industry influence through coordinated, evidence-based, and sustained action.

**Q** How are digital marketing and influencer campaigns targeting young people, and how should advocates respond?

**A** The tobacco industry is increasingly expanding its marketing strategies across social and digital media platforms. Beyond conventional influencer marketing, there is now a deliberate focus on embedding tobacco and nicotine products within youth-oriented lifestyle contexts.

These tactics involve the strategic placement of new products in everyday settings that appeal to younger audiences. Across Africa, the rise of Afrobeat music has evolved into a cultural movement, which the industry has exploited through subtle promotional associations. Recently, there has been a notable increase in the visibility of vaping devices and related imagery in films and music videos, further normalizing tobacco use within popular culture. Moreover, the media - particularly digital and social media platforms - should serve as central tools for mobilization and awareness-raising. Empowering young people with accurate information about the health risks of tobacco use is essential. Intergenerational dialogue can guide strategic direction, but young advocates should take the lead in digital resistance efforts.

These may include amplifying advocacy campaigns, highlighting past successes, and sharing personal narratives of individuals who have successfully quit tobacco use, thereby reinforcing hope and collective resilience against industry manipulation.



“

**Rejecting all forms of inducement or compromise,  
I remained firm despite intimidation.**

”

**Q** What concrete protections are most urgently needed for tobacco-control advocates in low- and middle-income countries?

**A** Tobacco control structures and organizations in many low- and middle-income countries require significant institutional strengthening. Sustainable progress cannot be achieved through short-term project cycles; rather, it demands long-term strategic planning and consistent resource allocation.

Continuous capacity building is essential to equip advocates with the knowledge and skills needed to respond to the evolving tactics of the tobacco industry. Furthermore, there is a critical need for a structured distress-response mechanism to provide timely support for advocates facing threats, legal harassment, or violence. Establishing an effective system of global solidarity and coordinated response is imperative to protect and sustain those at the forefront of tobacco control efforts.

**Q** How can civil society organizations across Africa collaborate more effectively to resist industry interference?

**A** African non-governmental organizations (NGOs) require a comprehensive and coordinated platform to systematically document and respond to tobacco industry interference. Establishing a continent-wide action framework would enhance collective preparedness, strategic alignment, and policy coherence across countries. Equally important is the facilitation of regular knowledge exchange and experience sharing among advocates.

In this regard, the creation of an “**Africa Week of Resistance Against Tobacco Industry Interference**” would be highly beneficial. Such an initiative would convene advocates, policymakers, and other stakeholders to undertake joint actions, raise public awareness, and emphasize the urgent need to safeguard tobacco control policies from industry influence.

**Q** What key gaps do you see in enforcing Article 5.3 of the WHO FCTC - especially Article 5.3 across African countries?

**A** Article 5.3 of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) and its implementing guidelines have not yet been fully incorporated into legally binding and enforceable frameworks across most African countries. In several cases, conflict-of-interest declarations have been adopted merely as administrative measures, lacking substantive legal authority or enforcement mechanisms. Moreover, the absence of liability provisions or deterrent sanctions allows industries to contravene the spirit and intent of Article 5.3 with minimal consequence. These regulatory and institutional gaps require urgent and comprehensive attention to ensure full and effective implementation of the Article’s obligations.



**Q** What successful strategies from Nigeria could be adapted by other African countries, and what should they avoid?

**A** The Nigerian tobacco control community comprises professionals from diverse disciplines, each contributing distinct expertise, platforms, and networks to advance the national campaign. Civil society organizations forged strong alliances with government stakeholders, creating a collaborative framework for policy advocacy. Although non-governmental actors maintained a cooperative stance, they also preserved their independence and were willing to hold government institutions accountable when necessary.

A key lesson from the Nigerian experience is the importance of resilience. It took several years after Nigeria ratified the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) to enact a comprehensive national law, and several additional years to develop and implement supporting regulations. Continued advocacy eventually led to the adoption of measures restricting the glamorization of smoking in films. The process has been long and demanding, yet it has yielded significant and enduring achievements for tobacco control in the country.

**Q** How do you envision the future of tobacco industry interference prevention in Africa over the next 10 years?

**A** Over the next decade, I envision an Africa where tobacco control policies are fully protected from industry interference. In this vision, all African nations will have effectively domesticated Article 5.3 of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control and its accompanying guidelines.

I foresee a continent where administrative and legal frameworks explicitly prohibit any form of tobacco industry involvement in public health policymaking, with clear and enforceable sanctions for violations.

Ultimately, I aspire to see an Africa where the tobacco industry is held legally accountable for the extensive harm its products have inflicted on public health, through robust and comprehensive liability mechanisms.



**-- END --**