

Opinion piece

## **A cigarette is finite – but not the ingenuity of the tobacco companies**

Suzanne Gabriels, Tobacco Control Expert at the Belgian Foundation against Cancer

**Philip Morris International predicts the end of the cigarette *for a number of countries* within 10 to 15 years. So said André Calantzopoulos, the CEO of PMI, at an event organised on the fringe of the United Nations (UN) General Assembly.**

This is a remarkable statement from PMI. To put it politely, it represents a clear attempt to create confusion and present PMI as a respectable business. In plainer terms, the Belgian Foundation against Cancer regards it as downright shameful, if not criminal, given the impossibility of marketing and selling tobacco products in a way that is compatible with public health or the UN's [SDG \(Sustainable Development Goals\)](#) agenda.

According to Article 5.3. of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), there is a fundamental and irreconcilable conflict between the interests of the tobacco industry and the interests of public health policy.

So let's unpack what's going on here and expose the cunning tactics of the tobacco producers. It is no coincidence that PMI chooses to communicate on the fringe of a UN meeting. During the Concordia summit, policymakers and opinion leaders from the public, private and non-profit sectors come together to identify actions based on shared values. PMI is happy to chip in with a story that looks positive at first sight. But is it really what it seems?

Tobacco companies were responsible for 100 million deaths worldwide in the 20th century – an astonishing figure. In the 21st century, we could well end up with close to 1 billion tobacco deaths worldwide. The tobacco industry creates enormous problems in terms of health, as well as in the areas of child labour, deforestation, the disposal of butts, etc.

'Tobacco harm reduction'(THR), the fashionable new term in the tobacco prevention field that PMI eagerly uses, was originally started by small e-cigarette manufacturers and encouraged by well-organised vapers. Today, however, it is the big four international tobacco companies that are at the forefront of the THR strategy and are marketing 'healthy' alternatives to the cigarette.

Never before in history has the problem arisen of the businesses providing the harm reduction solutions being those that created the problem in the first place. The producers that have brought about cases of heroin addiction are not the manufacturers of methadone (a harm reduction product for drug control purposes, available on prescription from a doctor). The producers of condoms, an important factor in AIDS prevention, have had no responsibility whatsoever for the spread of that disease. Not so with the tobacco companies: they sit on the side of the problem-makers, and then have the gall to appoint themselves as problem-solvers.

PMI presents itself as a great champion of a 'smoke-free world'. The company is investing 1 billion US dollars over 12 years in the Foundation for a Smoke-Free World, which has been set up as a research fund. Yet this 'smoke-free world' claim is totally lacking in credibility, for the following reasons:

- the company continues to seek new markets for the classic combustible cigarette, especially in Asia and Africa

- the company has not stopped its advertising campaigns for combustible cigarettes in places where they have not yet been banned by governments
- the claim that the company will ultimately stop selling combustible cigarettes is very non-committal. No timeline has been put forward for the complete cessation of sales anywhere in the world. The new communication on the occasion of the UN event likewise only refers to the end of the cigarette in a number of countries.

The objective or underlying agenda is a soft transition and the continued use of a business model based on addiction. PMI's new heated tobacco products, in which the tobacco is heated rather than burned, clearly reflect this. It is also striking that the so-called healthy alternatives to the cigarette, which it is now promoting internationally, yield higher profit margins than traditional cigarette sales. The question of how these new tobacco products should be taxed is therefore very much on the agenda, given that they have slipped through the mesh of the taxation net so far. The Belgian Foundation against Cancer will definitely work to ensure that this awkward issue remains on the political agenda.

**Information intended for journalists – not for publication**  
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