



Statement of Leonce SESSOU, Executive Secretary of the African Tobacco Control Alliance (ATCA) on the Release of the Africa Tobacco Industry Interference Index 2021.

African governments must secure their tobacco control efforts from tobacco industry interference

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For several decades, the tobacco industry has made frantic efforts to portray itself as a development partner. However, the maiden Africa Tobacco Industry Interference Index, launched this 27 October 2021, provides concrete evidence that across the continent, tobacco companies influence governments to undermine policies to protect the population from their deadly products.

While this fact has been known for quite a while, the index offers vital evidence that helps elucidate what the tobacco control community has always decried; that even though it portrays itself as responsible, the tobacco industry will do anything to maximise its profits, even when this leads to the death of more than 8 million people globally every year.

Article 5.3 of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) seeks to protect tobacco control policies from being influenced by the tobacco industry. It obliges Parties "to protect their public health policies related to tobacco control from commercial and other vested interests of the tobacco industry."

Despite the governments of some countries like Uganda, Kenya and Gabon making good progress in efforts to curb tobacco industry interference as evidenced in the index, it is clear that they face growing tobacco industry infiltration attempts, and need even more engagement and motivation to remain steadfast.

At a time when African governments are working tirelessly to contain the COVID-19 pandemic, the index reveals that the tobacco industry exploited this situation to undertake Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives, providing resources to countries as part of COVID-19 response support. This presented a great opportunity for the industry to frame itself as a partner that is genuinely concerned with the world's problems, even though it continues to aggressively market its deadly products and fiercely fight tobacco control policies that save lives. The FCTC in Article 1(g) highlights that such contributions fall within the definition of tobacco sponsorship and should be prohibited as part of a comprehensive ban, because the aim, effect or likely effect of such a contribution is to promote a tobacco product or tobacco use either directly or indirectly.

Today, we commend countries like Uganda, Kenya and Gabon for excelling in the index, and encourage countries like Zambia, Tanzania, Mozambique and South Africa which clearly need to put in a lot more effort and commitment to curb industry interference in their health policies.

We cannot continue to watch the tobacco industry snuff life out of our fellow citizens. The index suggests simple and practical solutions to these problems; governments can protect their health policies from tobacco industry interference by establishing a code of conduct guiding interactions between government officials and the industry, and ensuring strict implementation of such codes where they already exist. Where codes of conduct exist, regular training and awareness raising on tobacco industry interference should be undertaken to help keep public officials updated and to maintain their commitment.

Finally, governments can ensure that under no circumstance does the tobacco industry get to enjoy preferential treatment or undertake Corporate Social Responsibility activities which facilitate interference. It is time for governments to step up their political will and ensure that health policies are not derailed by

the tobacco industry. That is one major step towards guaranteeing the good health and wellbeing for their populations.

Media contact: AYONG I. CALEB

Email: ayong@atca-africa.org

The African Tobacco Control Alliance (ATCA) is a non-profit, non-political Pan-African network of civil society organizations headquartered in Lome, Togo. With membership in 39 countries, ATCA is dedicated to promoting public health and preventing the tobacco epidemic in the continent.