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## United Nations Global Compact: an ‘Inroad’ into the UN and reputation boost for the tobacco industry

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### Abstract

**Background**—The United Nations Global Compact (UNGC), a UN initiative to engage corporations in supporting the UN’s mission, sets out principles that companies should follow for more ethical business practices. Since its inception in 2000, at least 13 tobacco companies, subsidiaries and tobacco industry affiliates joined the UNGC. In a September 2017 integrity review, the UNGC Board excluded from UNGC participation companies who derive revenue from tobacco production or manufacturing.

**Objective**—To determine, from the tobacco industry’s perspective, tobacco companies’ motives for joining the UNGC.

**Method**—Tobacco industry documents search using the Truth Tobacco Industry Documents Library, and search of published reports and documents on the tobacco industry and the UNGC.

**Results**—Tobacco companies sought to join the UNGC for two reasons: (1) to improve their reputation, in keeping with other corporate social responsibility efforts; (2) to gain proximity to UN agencies and weaken the WHO’s influence, part of an overall strategy to undermine the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control.

**Conclusions**—Excluding tobacco manufacturers from UNGC participation is an important step to limit the tobacco industry’s ability to influence the UN and promote its image and, by extension, its deadly products. It is important to monitor enforcement of this policy and resist the

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engagement of tobacco industry front groups, such as industry-funded foundations, with the UNGC.

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## INTRODUCTION

The United Nations Global Compact (UNGC), launched in June 2000, is a global corporate responsibility and sustainability initiative. The UNGC mission is to help align corporate practices with UN goals through a series of principles on human rights, labour, environment and anticorruption that corporations are encouraged to follow.<sup>1</sup> Joining the UNGC is not legally binding; it is a voluntary initiative, with no specific enforcement mechanisms. The only requirement is that participants submit an annual progress report describing how they are supporting the UNGC and UN goals. Failure to do so 2 years in a row results in discontinuation of UNGC membership, after which companies must reapply.<sup>2</sup>

Before 12 September 2017, UNGC membership was open to all industry sectors except companies involved in manufacturing landmines or cluster bombs, companies subject to UN sanctions or companies blacklisted by UN Procurement for ethical reasons. Since 2008, the UNGC stated that it discouraged tobacco industry participation and did not accept tobacco industry funding, but tobacco companies could join the UNGC as long as they operated legally and were not under a UN ban.<sup>23</sup> This 2008 policy was a result of UNGC discussions with the WHO, tobacco control advocates and the UN Interagency Task Force on Tobacco Control (UNIATF) which coordinated the tobacco control activities of UN agencies at the time.<sup>4</sup>

On 12 September 2017, as part of an integrity review, UNGC stated that it would, effective immediately, exclude from participation companies involved in ‘the production and manufacturing of tobacco products, and nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons.’<sup>5</sup> The UNGC also stated that ‘participating companies which derive revenue from the production and/or manufacturing of tobacco’ would be delisted effective 15 October 2017,<sup>56</sup> suggesting that the exclusion encompassed both tobacco manufacturers and companies involved in the tobacco supply chain.<sup>6</sup> This decision has been lauded by several tobacco control and public health organisations.<sup>78</sup> This brief report describes why joining the UNGC appealed to several tobacco companies.

## METHODS

We searched internal tobacco industry documents in the Truth Tobacco Industry Documents Library (<https://www.industrydocumentslibrary.ucsf.edu/tobacco/>) from January to April 2017 using a standard snowball search technique,<sup>9</sup> starting with the search term ‘Global Compact’. We conducted follow-up searches with adjacent documents (Bates numbers) and names of individuals, organisations and events mentioned in the documents. We retrieved 176 documents and used 11 for this analysis. We also searched the UNGC website for tobacco companies that have joined the UNGC, using snowball searches starting with the search term ‘tobacco’. Additionally, we searched publicly available reports and documents related to the UNGC and tobacco, mainly from the UNIATF.

## RESULTS

Tobacco industry documents show that British American Tobacco (BAT) planned to join the UNGC in 2000 in order to improve its reputation, infiltrate UN agencies and ultimately weaken the WHO. At the time, the WHO was leading negotiations of the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC), a global tobacco control treaty which is estimated to have saved 22 million lives in 2007–2014.<sup>10</sup> During FCTC negotiations, tobacco companies executed an elaborate strategy to undermine WHO's influence at the UN, positioning themselves as UN partners in a bid to weaken the FCTC.<sup>11</sup>

In December 2000, BAT sought advice on joining the UNGC from the public relations (PR) firm Shandwick International, which had worked with BAT on other efforts to weaken the FCTC.<sup>12</sup> Shandwick stressed that joining the UNGC could 'launch BAT as a socially responsible company' and help BAT 'break down barriers in the UN system, maybe as far as the WHO!' (p 4).<sup>13</sup> BAT also consulted EQ Management, a PR consultancy specialising in corporate social responsibility (CSR), on joining the UNGC. In a 16 January 2001 note to BAT, EQ advised BAT to join the UNGC as it 'might be a good way of making an inroad into the UN. This would be desirable if we wish to ensure that the WHO position does not become the UN position by default' (p 2).<sup>14</sup>

That same day (16 January 2001), Shabanji Opukah, BAT's head of international development issues, reached out to Georg Kell, then Director of the Global Compact Secretariat, about joining the UNGC. In a January 2001 email to his colleagues, Opukah wrote that he had spoken to Kell about joining the UNGC: 'Kell said he is a smoker and he supports freedoms (sic) of choice—but this and his sympathy for our position cannot change the situation.'<sup>15</sup> The 'situation' Opukah was referring to was that dealings between the UN and any business or sector were discouraged if a UN agency was campaigning against that business or sector. In this case, it was the WHO advocating against tobacco companies through FCTC negotiations.<sup>15</sup> The documents reported that Kell advised BAT not to join the UNGC, and to focus instead on initiatives with specialised UN agencies such as the International Labour Organization, since these agencies were not covered by the Secretary General's guidelines and were therefore free to take on initiatives with tobacco companies.<sup>15</sup>

A few days later, Shandwick advised BAT to maintain a dialogue with Kell and to use it as an opportunity to show 'how exempting tobacco will reveal precarious contradictions in the Compact,' with special emphasis on 'the associated problems that such a decision may have for all members of the Compact and new applicants' (p 1).<sup>16</sup> Shandwick was alluding to a 'slippery slope'—the argument that excluding tobacco companies could force the UNGC to exclude other controversial sectors, such as the fast food industry (p 1).<sup>16</sup> Two days later, Opukah wrote a thank you letter to Kell, requesting continued engagement with the UN and a meeting to discuss BAT's CSR work and business principles.<sup>17</sup> We do not know whether BAT subsequently engaged with Kell.

Philip Morris Companies (PMC, now Altria) appeared more cautious than BAT about joining the UNGC. In 2001, PMC created a task force to advise whether its companies should adopt a corporate code of conduct.<sup>18</sup> The UNGC was among the codes considered.<sup>19</sup>

Notes from the group's first meeting indicate that, like BAT, PMC regarded signing on to a corporate code such as UNGC as a reputation booster, advancing "our strategy of 'normalization'" and reducing 'isolation'.<sup>20</sup> Ultimately, however, due to concerns about verifying compliance with code principles, the task force recommended delaying the adoption of any code.<sup>21</sup>

At some point, Philip Morris International (PMI) and others decided to join the UNGC: at least 13 tobacco companies, subsidiaries or tobacco industry affiliates joined between 2003 and 2015. Before September 2017, some had been continuous members, some had discontinued their memberships and some had reactivated their memberships after an inactive period (table 1).

## DISCUSSION

Tobacco companies joined the UNGC to improve their image and gain influence at the UN as part of their effort to undermine the FCTC. Non-governmental organisations have, quite rightly, criticised the UNGC and applauded its September 2017 decision to exclude tobacco companies from participation.<sup>7822</sup> Other UN agencies, such as the International Labour Organization, which still partnered with tobacco companies as of October 2017, should follow suit.<sup>23–25</sup> Tobacco industry involvement in the UNGC provided a precedent that was disruptive for other efforts to encourage UN agencies to reject engagement with the tobacco industry.

Joining the UNGC was part of broader CSR efforts by tobacco companies. Tobacco companies use such efforts, including financial support for non-governmental organisations<sup>26</sup> and funding of nominal youth smoking prevention<sup>27</sup> and cessation programmes,<sup>28</sup> to improve their public image, enhance their credibility,<sup>29</sup> gain access to and influence policymakers,<sup>30</sup> avoid or weaken regulation,<sup>31</sup> influence the tobacco control agenda<sup>29</sup> and create alliances.<sup>32</sup> The FCTC considers CSR a tobacco marketing strategy, included in the FCTC's ban on tobacco marketing and promotion.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, PMI has used the UNGC as a marketing tool for investors.<sup>34</sup> In a 2017 promotional video to investors,<sup>35</sup> PMI stated that 'PMI has signed the United Nations Global Compact and [is] incorporating their principles in our strategy, our culture, and our day-to-day operations.'<sup>35</sup>

It is unclear why tobacco companies were ever considered eligible for UNGC membership. Tobacco companies systematically violate UNGC principles, most notably principles 1 (to respect and protect human rights), 2 (to not be complicit in human rights abuses),<sup>36</sup> 5 (abolition of child labour),<sup>37</sup> and 7, 8 and 9 (to protect the environment).<sup>38</sup> They also violate UNGC principles through repeated attempts to undermine the FCTC and, by extension, the right to the highest attainable standard of health.<sup>39</sup> As recently as 2014, PMI described the FCTC as a 'regulatory runaway train' driven by 'anti-tobacco extremists,' and in 2016 covertly tried to undermine FCTC discussions at the Seventh Conference of the Parties to the FCTC in New Delhi.<sup>40</sup>

The tobacco industry has consistently retained its objective of diminishing the WHO's influence at the UN and undermining the FCTC, a UN treaty.

In June 2017, the UN Economic and Social Council adopted a resolution calling on UN agencies to prevent tobacco industry interference and follow a model policy that, in alignment with the FCTC, rejects all partnerships with the tobacco industry. UNGC's 2017 exclusion of tobacco manufacturers is key to that end, although it is important to note the language of the UNGC statements. Specifically, the UNGC excludes companies 'involved in' or 'which derive revenue from' the 'production and/or manufacturing of tobacco.'<sup>56</sup> This exclusion covers tobacco companies such as PMI and BAT. It should also cover companies such as Eastman Chemical Company, which has been a UNGC participant since 2014,<sup>41</sup> and reported sales revenues of 11% from tobacco products in its 2016 annual report.<sup>42</sup>

A potential loophole in the 2017 UNGC policy is that it does not necessarily exclude tobacco industry front groups, such as industry-funded non-profits, unless they derive revenue from tobacco. The Eliminating Child Labour in Tobacco Growing Foundation (ECLT), for example, is funded by tobacco companies and a UNGC participant since 2015. Its stated purpose is to combat child labour in tobacco growing, although it effectively serves to promote the corporate image of tobacco multinationals and work against effective FCTC implementation.<sup>37</sup> PMI's 'Foundation for a Smokefree World', announced in September 2017, has been criticised by public health advocates as a ploy to boost PMI's corporate image.<sup>4344</sup> It is not currently a UNGC participant but it is not clear if, like ECLT, it could become one.

### Limitations

The main source of information for this paper was the Truth Tobacco Industry Documents Library, a collection of documents produced through litigation against tobacco companies. Information was incomplete in places. To address this limitation, we also sourced information from the UNGC website and UNIATF reports. However, we did not interview the persons mentioned in the documents.

### CONCLUSION

To prevent tobacco industry front groups from exploiting loopholes in UNGC's policy, there is a need to clarify and refine the current exclusion criteria to exclude tobacco industry-funded organisations. It is also important to monitor the enforcement of this policy. The UNGC should also review its Board membership in light of the new policy. Continuous monitoring will ensure that the UNGC's new policy, an important step for UN leadership in tobacco control, will strip tobacco companies of the ability to use the UNGC to undermine the FCTC and to promote their CSR and, by extension, their deadly products.

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### What this paper adds

- Between 2003 and 2015, thirteen tobacco companies, subsidiaries and tobacco industry affiliates joined the United Nations Global Compact (UNGC), a UN initiative to engage corporations in supporting the UN's mission.
- In September 2017, UNGC excluded companies that derive revenue from tobacco production or manufacture from participating in the compact.
- Internal tobacco industry documents show that tobacco companies joined the UNGC to gain influence at the United Nations as part of an overall strategy to undermine the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control and to improve their reputations.
- Excluding tobacco manufacturers from the UNGC denies them the reputation boost associated with UNGC participation and helps limit their influence at the United Nations, but tobacco control advocates should continue to monitor and resist indirect tobacco industry involvement with the UNGC through front groups and third parties.

**Table 1**

Tobacco companies and tobacco industry affiliates that have joined the UNGC. Note that this may not be a comprehensive list

Company	Month/year joined UNGC	Status as of August 2017	Comments
Souza Cruz	January 2003 <sup>45</sup>	Member of UNGC	Brazilian subsidiary of BAT
Ceylon Tobacco Company	November 2003 <sup>46</sup>	Discontinued in November 2007 for failing to submit progress reports	Sri Lankan subsidiary of BAT
Standard Commercial Tobacco	May 2004 <sup>47</sup>	Discontinued in May 2008 for failing to submit progress reports	Tobacco leaf dealer in the USA
Limbe Leaf Tobacco Company	July 2006 <sup>48</sup>	Discontinued in July 2012 for failing to submit progress reports	Tobacco processing company in Malawi
Together Ensuring Children's Security	July 2006 <sup>49</sup>	Discontinued in October 2016 for failing to submit progress reports	Tobacco industry-funded NGO
India Tobacco Company (ITC) Ltd	April 2008 <sup>50</sup>	Member of UNGC	Now known as ITC Limited
Fuente Cigar Ltd/Cigar Family Charitable Foundation	July 2010 <sup>51</sup>	Member of UNGC	Cigar manufacturer in the Dominican Republic. Foundation focuses on general philanthropy.
Philip Morris Dominicana	July 2010 <sup>52</sup>	Discontinued in July 2012 for failing to submit progress reports	Dominican Republic subsidiary of PMI
Korea Tobacco & Ginseng Corp (KT&G)	March 2012 <sup>53</sup>	Discontinued in June 2014 for failing to submit progress reports	Now known as Korea Tomorrow & Global Corporation
State Alcohol and Tobacco Company of Iceland (ATVR)	June 2012 <sup>54</sup>	Member of UNGC	
Eliminating Child Labour in Tobacco Growing Foundation (ECLT)	April 2015 <sup>55</sup>	Member of UNGC	Tobacco industry-funded NGO
Plasencia Cigars	April 2015 <sup>56</sup>	Member of UNGC	Cigar manufacturer in Honduras and Nicaragua
Philip Morris International (PMI)	June 2015 <sup>57</sup>	Member of UNGC	

BAT, British American Tobacco; NGO, non-governmental organisation; UNGC, United Nations Global Compact.