

# Creating a global corporate network to undermine public health

The tobacco companies have overcome competitive interests to attempt to undermine public health messages about the dangers of cigarette smoking

The global tobacco epidemic claims 5 million lives each year, facilitated by the ability of transnational tobacco companies to delay or thwart meaningful tobacco control worldwide. A series of cross-company tobacco industry "issues management organizations" has played an important role in coordinating and implementing common strategies to defeat tobacco control efforts at international, national, and regional levels. This study examines the development and enumerates the activities of these organizations and explores the implications of continuing industry cooperation for global public health.

Using a snowball sampling strategy, we collected documentary data from tobacco industry documents archives and assembled them into a chronologically organized case study.

The International Committee on Smoking Issues (ICOSI) was formed in 1977 by seven tobacco company chief executives to create common anti-tobacco control strategies and build a global network of regional and national manufacturing associations. The organization's name subsequently changed to INFOTAB. The multinational companies built the organization rapidly: by 1984, it had 69 members operating in 57 countries. INFOTAB material, including position papers and "action kits" helped members challenge local tobacco control measures and maintain tobacco-friendly environments. In 1992 INFOTAB was replaced by two smaller organizations. The Tobacco Documentation Centre, which continues to operate, distributes smoking-related information and industry argumentation to members, some produced by cross-company committees. Agro-Tobacco Services, and now Hallmark Marketing Services, assists the INFOTAB-backed and industry supported International Tobacco Growers Association in advancing claims regarding the economic importance of tobacco in developing nations.

The massive scale and scope of this industry effort illustrate how corporate interests, when threatened by the globalization of public health, sidestep competitive concerns to coordinate their activities. The global network of national and regional manufacturing associations created and nurtured by INFOTAB remains active, particularly in relation to the recently negotiated global health treaty, the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control. Policymakers should be aware that although these associations claim to represent only national or regional interests, they are allied to and coordinated with a confederation of transnational tobacco companies seeking to protect profits by undermining public health.

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